

# **penumbra**

**speculative  
fiction mag**

June 2k20 • vol iv issue 1

## **Fighting Dystopia**

**... but can you write it when  
it's all around you?**

**Interview with Colleen Donnelly**

## **New Beginnings**

**An interview with Bram  
Stoker Award-winner  
Christina Sng**

**Plus Grace Wagner • Novyl the  
Mysterious • Lenore Sagaskie •  
Mark Anthony Smith • T. Motley •  
Jesper Nordqvist**

*detail from Eclipse/Penumbra by James Cukr*

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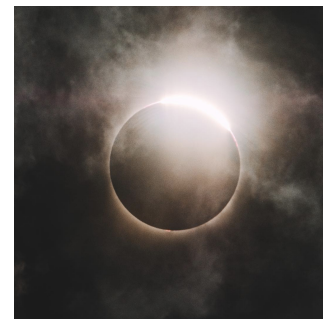
cover: *Eclipse/Penumbra*  
by James Cukr



*The Kiss of the Beast*



*Mondo Mecho*





# From the Editor

by Jeff Georgeson

THE ORIGINAL PLAN FOR THIS EDITORIAL was to trumpet *Penumbric's* return, to tell you all about this new/old project, to be relentlessly hyper about it ...

Well, we know what happens to original plans.

As I write this, not only is the world dealing with a pandemic in about a hundred different ways, ranging from actual lockdowns to shrugging shoulders to actually protesting being told to protect oneself from dying; some believe that just letting the virus run its course (and capturing “herd immunity”) at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives is just peachy, and some believe that immediate economic return alone is worth tens of thousands of deaths. And this isn't all.

The US is undergoing daily protests like it hasn't seen since the 1960s, and for many of the same reasons—and the world is protesting as well, not only for the inequalities in other countries but against the US. I used to think, in the bubble I lived in as a child, that we were continually moving forward, becoming more diverse, becoming more accepting. The 70s and 90s seemed particularly progressive, from that certain point of view ... but that turned out to be, at best, the media presenting us with the most optimistic version of events, with TV sitcoms telling us that *The Fresh Prince* and *Cosby* were the new faces of acceptance. Even then we could tell it was imperfect, sanitized. But we certainly couldn't go backwards, could we? I mean, we actually elected a Black president. Doesn't that just make it all better? Doesn't that mean that racism had disappeared, and all was well in this utopic world?

Welcome to 2016. 2017, 2018, 2019. 2020. The whole 2010s, really, but the hatred, the vitriol, the backlash against even modest gains has become concentrated in the last few years. And here we are, suddenly back in a time before I was born, dealing with issues I

would have hoped were long since solved—well, not solved, but acknowledged, and on the way towards actual equality. But in the same way I was promised living on other planets and flying cars and teleportation (which are minor in comparison), matters of race and culture and diversity seem more a promise broken than one achieved. (Some days seem better than this. But this isn't some of those days, months, or years.)

And really, it's worse than all this. The technological changes that have occurred have, on the one hand, connected us in ways that used to be near-impossible. In the 1980s, even talking on the phone between the US and Spain meant static-filled conversations delayed by seconds as your voice trickled across the Atlantic at great expense. Now we do video calls to several people at once spread across the globe in real time, and for free.

Well, not free. And there's the rub. We're not the only ones in these conversations. Big Brother is watching as well. Not just the government version; now megalithic corporations collect every byte and bit of information, use analytics to squeeze as much info as they can out of it, and then go further by predicting those parts of our lives that they cannot see. And then they sell this information to the highest bidder—often those who benefit from segregating us, setting us up one against another.

And we fight this ... barely at all. Ever since Big Brother became a show everyone wanted to be on rather than a dark evil to be avoided at all costs, we have happily traded 3 seconds of fame (and falling) for access to our entire lives, for allowing corporations and governments to manipulate us into buying their product, voting for them, hating the enemies they want us to hate, hating each other, falling into ever-smaller silos even as we have access to cultures across the world.

And this is the irony, I guess. Whilst we now have the ability to learn about and experience people and cultures everywhere, we do not seem to have the desire to do so. Even though we are social creatures, we seem to have some sort of inbuilt limitation to the size of this society—or at least have a resistance to it, a rubberband effect that only allows us to increase our social and cultural knowledge so far before rebounding and making us insular, pitiful caricatures of what we could be.

I don't think this limitation is in all of us. I don't even think it's a hard and fast limitation in those who do experience it. I think all of us can learn about other humans, no matter where, and can appreciate their very humanity, even if little else, and build from there. The problem is, those who have the power to promote this, those who have our data, are currently the ones who have the least interest in building bridges. Many of our current governments have themselves reached that rubberband breaking point and rebounded, are xenophobic and insular ... and worse, are hungry for riches and power and all that can mean for them, and now see that the people's data can be used to keep us working for their aggrandizement and keep us in our own backyards, ignorant, fearful, and angry about every other yard on the block.

This is the dystopia we are allowing to be built. It is built not with Terminators or Sentinels but with data analytics and greed and fear. Whether it has gone so far we cannot stop it is ... a concern.

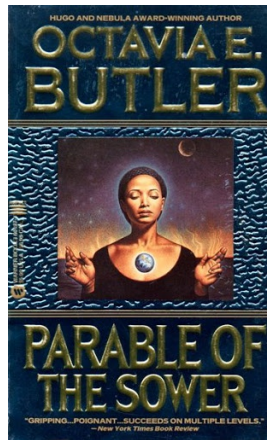
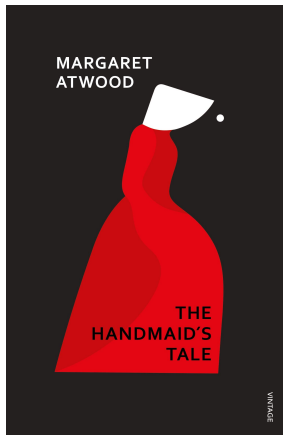
In this issue, the first for *Penumbric* in 15 years, we talk about

dystopia in fiction and whether one could even write *1984* in the current climate in our interview with Dr. Colleen Donnelly. We also include a few dark future pieces for your perusal—"Projections" by Donnelly, "Consumed" by Grace Wagner, and "All You Can Eat" by Mark Anthony Smith.

There is also hope even within nightmares. We interview Bram Stoker Award-winner Christina Sng as she celebrates putting out her new book, *A Collection of Dreamscapes*. We have "Angels Don't Wear Denim" by Lenore Sagaskie. And we continue the story of "Mondo Mecho" by Jesper Nordqvist (well, we begin it again, after all this time), while beginning T. Motley's serial "The Road to Golgonooza."

The art covers the gamut as well. We have both darkness and light in pieces by Novyl the Mysterious, and our cover art is once more provided by James Cukr, whom I interviewed for our very first issue back in 2002.

I have restarted *Penumbric* with diverse voices in mind. We are specifically looking for work representing multiple cultures and values, exploring issues of race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, and more. This is particularly important now, as we move through a world whose mindset seems to be shrinking, whose myopia is growing, and whose leaders treat us as just so much data to be manipulated. It may be small, but *Penumbric* will amplify those voices as best we can. That I promise.



# Writing from Within Dystopian fiction in a dystopic world

An interview with Colleen Donnelly

WE LAST SPOKE TO DR. COLLEEN DONNELLY about the direction sf was heading back in one of our first issues in 2002. It seemed only natural to revisit it, 18 years on. But then the world changed. What do you do when you find yourself writing—or teaching—in a world that looks like it's a combination of *1984* and *Contagion*?

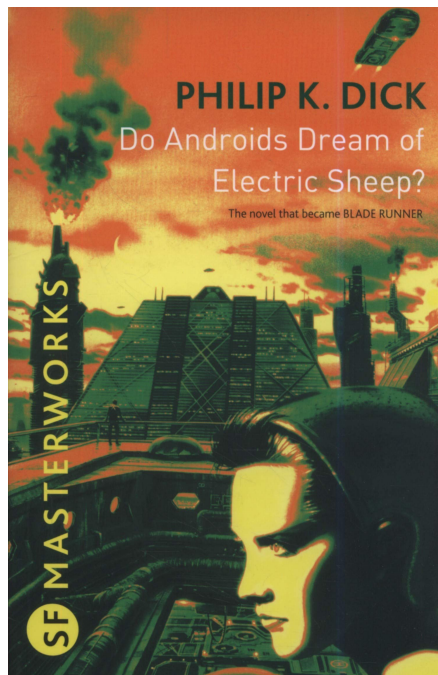
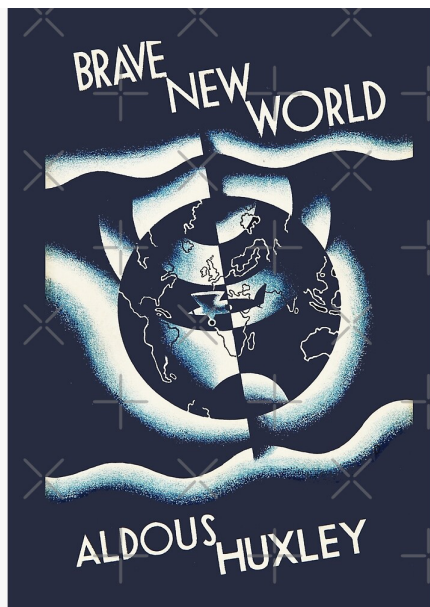
Dr. Donnelly has recently taught a class in dystopian fiction, including not only obvious candidates like *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* but also *Parable of the Sower*, *The Time Machine*, *The Lathe of Heaven*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, and *Neuromancer*, among others.

\* \* \*

*Having just taught dystopic fiction, what do you think of trying to write a dystopic story at this time?*

I think it's really hard to write dystopia right now, because everything's coming true, and it's so right there for you. In different areas. You've got climate crisis, you have this pandemic, you have this social upheaval that reminds me of pre-WWII quite honestly. I read a lot of what Hitler did, and populism, and the power of words, and there's this wonderful book called *After Babel* by George Steiner that talks about how Hitler came into power and the power of the charisma and the





power of the populist message and all that kind of thing. So we've got a lot of those strands that are in dystopic novels coming alive right now. I was watching an interview with Steven King the other day, and he said something that I think is really true. People really like horror right now, because you get to escape in there, and it resolves itself, so it has that cathartic effect. And I think that's right. Reading dystopia is really hard right now. And at least horror is a little bit more distant and surreal, and that actually has more of a comfort level to it.

Because of the background I have in molecular biology, I would say that around 2000, the detective genre, the crime novel, became very problematic for writers, because the issue is that the only thing you have to do to find out whodunit is collect DNA. So one of the things I find really interesting about that is that it pushes it into a quasi-historical genre. "Let's talk about the mass murderer in 1920; let's imagine that." And I have a feeling that that may need to happen with dystopia; you're either going to have to place it on another planet or in a different time or something, because it needs to be moved out of the near-present because of what the near-present represents right now.

*That way you get that distance that horror has, that it manages to be a little step removed, and be self-contained, with some kind of resolution to it.*

Right, because there is so much dystopia [right now], people don't want the warnings, they want the answer. It can't just end with that "Beware! Here's the warning ..." It's got to have "here's how you get out of it," or it's

going to have to go in the direction that Gaiman and Pratchett and those guys went in—satire, humor, some sort of flair. The dystopia by itself is just too problematic.

*Do you think that, besides horror, can something like fantasy do that as well?*

Yes, I think that it's got to be moved into another world, another time, that's the problem, or it's got to have a different kind of ending.

Some other topics that show up in science fiction are post-apocalyptic and alien, other worlds. I was thinking that the one thing we did avoid was the nuclear holocaust for now ... I was thinking about Heinlein's list of things that would happen by 2000, and didn't—going to other planets, wiping out poverty, and all that kind of stuff. He was right about some things, but I don't ... the alien, the other world thing, I don't think it has the same flavor or feel that the precautionary science fiction does, so there may be something in that. That's also the type that too easily falls into the juvenile sf category ... there's some people who break from that, like LeGuin, Octavia Butler, and I think that people who have anthropological interests really do that. I think that's the other direction in science fiction that seems interesting, is in recapturing the mythic dimensions, that kind of native world or other world views. That doesn't displace dystopia, but I think that's where people who are looking for something that isn't just fatalistic right now may be going. Even Atwood kind of goes into that idea of creating a new myth. It just doesn't feel the same as the apocalyptic stories from the 50s and 60s and 70s. This is a lot more about using the

anthropological, other religions and cultures and that to build a world.

*Not just The Day After Tomorrow or something. Or say Godzilla ...*

Right. Or the Mad Max, or the post-zombie apocalypse stuff. These have a different sense to them. The issue is that the concentration is on the world that you have after. It's not utopian in the sense of a pre-lapsarian fallen world, but that it's the idea of actually building cultures. That's what's unique about them, is that they're culture building books, and the issue is how do you build a new culture, which generally has some resemblance to the Western dominant capitalist cultures, but has other cultures' elements in it.

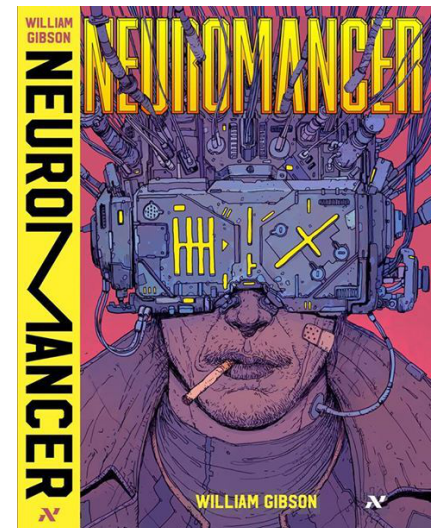
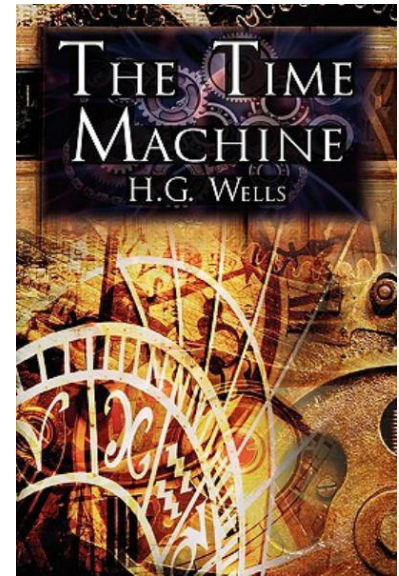
*Last time I asked whether sf was still relevant as a university course. Your answer at the time was that it was part of the canon, including Poe, Lovecraft, and most importantly Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, which is "the myth we deal with at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century." Is it still as important?*

It is. I think any school that doesn't do genre work is doing a disservice to students and to people in general. For one thing, people read by genres. We read the genres that we enjoy, right? I mean, I think the fundamental thing about knowing about POV and knowing forms and everything is important, but one of the things that you and I know about reading genres is that people don't know the history of the genre, they think they can write science fiction because they like scifi or they've played games on a computer. And fantasy's even worse; "I've read

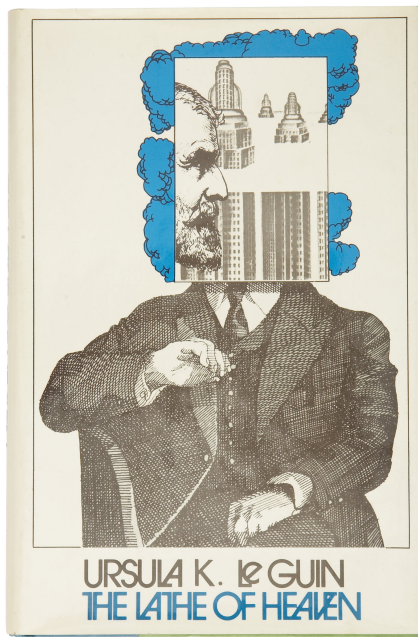
Tolkien. I can write fantasy."

*Frankenstein* still works well as a seminal text. It launches us into the modern myth (versus old Greek ones no one remembers), bringing up the issue of the role of science and personal responsibility and is a great link to works of artificial intelligence, creating "life" and playing God, and our potential to destroy ourselves. It also is wonderful because its framed narrative brings up issues of how stories are told and point of view and it also brings up socioeconomic issues in terms of the class system and interactions of bourgeoisie and proletariat, and it has great issues of individual agency and angst. The numerous reworkings of *Frankenstein*, including parodies such as *Young Frankenstein* and cartoons/comics such as *Far Side*, also demonstrate how it resonates through the culture.

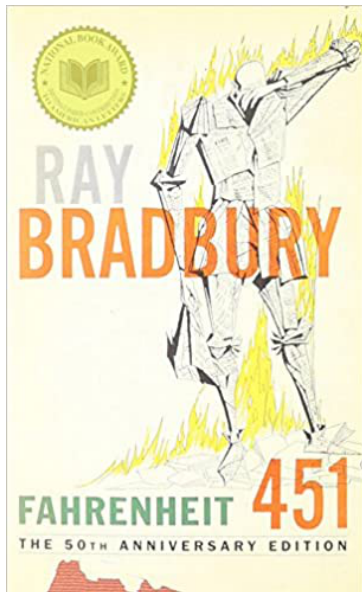
I think if you want to write fantasy, read Tolkien's sources, as many of them still provide untapped materials—medieval literature, Icelandic and Norse epics, other mythologies—especially non-Western mythologies that offer stories and philosophies that may be unknown to our readership. Understanding that much of the enduring science fiction is in fact a commentary on the world today or makes use of history means that a writer's work will often have more substance if they are aware of such issues and make them part of the atmosphere if not the themes of their book. Think of the numerous issues brought up in *Dune* that resonate—climate change, limited resources, symbiosis, social inequity and migration, political/ruling structures, competing philosophies and religions, the pros and cons of







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drugs and altered states of consciousness. I do believe one can't write well in a genre without reading in that genre. Unfortunately video game play too often replaces reading, and a plot (adventure) is not by itself a good story. It is important to know what has been done well in the genre you are writing in: its plotlines, its themes, the narrative structures that have been employed, the philosophies and ideologies explored within, to be able to write something that adds to the canon that exists.

*What kinds of things are you working on right now?*

The genre that I'm actually working with the most right now, which I would never have dreamed of because I technically can't stand it, is first-person narrative. I don't like memoir, I don't like autobiography or biography. But because of all this work I've done on mental health both as a crisis counselor the past two years and through my research ... lately, I've been doing a lot of work on the issue of first-person narrative, the mediated narrative, and structured narrative when other people get ahold of it, and voice—what happens to voice when it's controlled and contextualized by other people, which is really fascinating. I just taught a class on illness and disability narratives, and the idea of how they are controlled by audiences, publishers, and editors, and looked at how people get to control how the author presents themselves and how that can result in self-stigmatization. All these really, really wonderful topics that I never got exposed to. Like I said, I hate biography, I never read it, and now I'm reading it with this much more social political dynamic in mind: people don't realize

what goes into these narratives and how our narratives get usurped. For me, for the mental health issue, it's that people don't realize that just because somebody says "I'm hearing voices" doesn't mean they're psychotic. We all hear voices. People talk about talking to God and we don't lock them up. People refer to talking to a kind of Jiminy Cricket, a little "conscience" on their shoulder. That issue of voice is so central to who we are. We have different voices. We speak in different language styles. So that has become super super interesting to me. ...

Most of the work that I'm doing is non-fiction. I probably will go back and do that second part of the "Projections" story [featured later in this issue]. That piece came directly out of that class. I was talking to students about ideas that they had for stories, and it just stimulated an idea for me to have a story that I then ended up working on during the summer.

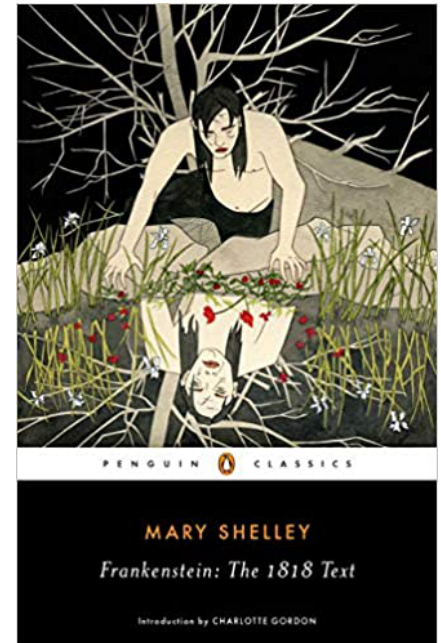
I'm doing two or three different things. One is that I'm writing short blogs. I don't want to start my own blog but rather publish in places that have wider readership, so I've published three or four for Psych Central and I did another one for the APA's psychotherapy division. I did a piece that basically was off of *Fight Club*—"You are not your disease," you know, from that "I am Bob's liver" kind of thing that goes on in *Fight Club*, so you know, "I am not cancer," but it was on mental illness. The piece I did for the APA was called "Amorphous Pain"; it was about the fact that we have no ways of talking about or measuring psychological pain. In physical pain, we describe it as tingling or whatever, or level two

or three. When you talk about psychological pain, it's are you an imminent risk or are you not? If you're an imminent risk we'll put you in the hospital tomorrow and if not you can wait four months for help. We don't care whether you're functioning or not. So it was all about the issue of how we diminish what people who have psychological pain go through. ...

The work on illness narratives started with Arthur Frank, who says there are quest narratives, restitution narratives, and chaos narratives. And chaos narratives are by people who are still suffering, so they're silenced. You don't get to speak these narratives. They aren't accepted. Nobody listens to them. Disability communities are trying to challenge that somewhat, but I think the other reason you don't get them is because of Western

philosophy, which dictates that a narrative has a certain form—it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and it has to have a resolution. Chaos narratives don't have that. These are stories by people who are living with things like MS and that, who don't live in a world where things are going to get better, and oftentimes those narratives that deal with it best are more easternly centered in the sense that you accept, stay in the moment, that kind of thing. So I want to write both on the issue that chaos should not be silenced, and the fact that we have silenced it because of Western expectations of how narratives are supposed to be told.

*Colleen Donnelly is a professor at the University of Colorado at Denver specializing in medieval and modern literature and health humanities.*



# NEW BEGINNINGS

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## An interview with Christina Sng

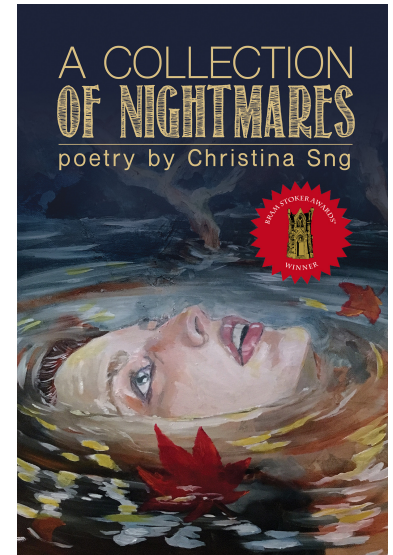
WE FIRST INTERVIEWED CHRISTINA SNG for the June 2k3 issue of *Penumbria*, and at the time she was already an accomplished writer with 200 poems sold in only a few years. But then between then and now, she (as we did) took a break, and she stopped writing for 8 years, for a variety of reasons—having children, and a combination of sleep deprivation and a lack of support. But she never lost her creative spark (even during this time she made toys—for her children, which, she says, “makes me so happy to see my children still cherishing all their Mama-made toys now kept in their treasure boxes”). And now she’s definitely back, having won the Bram Stoker Award for *A Collection of Nightmares* and being an Elgin Award runner-up for *Astropoetry* (amongst many other nominations and awards). She is one of the most prolific writers we know—that 200 poems has blossomed to a thousand, and in addition she’s sold about 20 pieces of art. And of course her books, including the brand new *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, *Astropoetry*, and *An Assortment of Sky Things*. (You can find a full list at [christinasng.com/bibliography.html](http://christinasng.com/bibliography.html).)

We are very privileged to be able to interview her again as we begin a new journey for *Penumbria*.

\* \* \*

*What’s different now about writing (as compared to fifteen years ago)? How is your writing process different now (or is it)? Are there specific events or particular topics that inspire you?*

It’s been an uncharted, arduous journey for me this past decade and much of my work has documented this. My most joyful moments have been with my children and I’ve







## THE PRICE OF PEACE

All my life,  
I've been told to keep the peace,  
Even if it meant lying down  
To let parts of me be cut away,  
One by one to be taken as  
Someone else's trophy.

One day,  
My cut parts stopped growing back.  
It was then I realized  
They were all wrong.  
I should not keep the peace.  
I should fight.

I should wage war  
So my children would never  
Have to sacrifice their bodies  
For another person's peace.  
Because we are not a peaceful species.  
In our hearts, we are always at war.

written them into many of my poems. At the same time, my eyes have opened to some of the worst evils man is capable of. These themes are explored in my second book *A Collection of Dreamscapes*, and they will possibly spill into my third and fourth books as well.

*In what way has the rise of social media changed your writing or approach to it (if it has), or the way you market your*

*work? Have any other technologies changed your work?*

Social media has been great for me. It helped me survive those long nights and days, feeling connected to the world and people who cared.

Now we do a lot of our marketing on social media and it has been a wonderful way to get news and information about

our work out.

I use primarily Facebook as I am most familiar with the medium. I also post on Twitter and Instagram but a little less frequently.

The smart phone has been critical to my writing and being digitized, helps my submissions get sent out faster without having to transcribe them.



*Recently you've published A Collection of Dreamscapes, and you have other relatively recent collections from the last few years (for example, A Collection of Nightmares, Astropoetry, and An Assortment of Sky Things). How did you end up putting these together?*

Long, late nights and a clear mind, which weren't always congruent. There was always a sense of needing to collect the poems, perhaps an innate feeling of organizing things that led to them.

Most writers dream of having a book published. It has been my life's dream since I was a child. I worked whenever I could to organize my poems with countless read-throughs to ensure they flowed and ensuring there were no typos or errors in the formatting.

*Do you still publish science and engineering articles? Specifically, are you still interested in nanotechnology? What about the rise of AI?*

Unfortunately, that well has dried up. I'd love to write more articles, but raising kids took up all of my time over the past decade.

I could only write when everyone was asleep, and often I was exhausted by then. Still, I pushed on. I've survived on 4 hours of sleep for many years now just

*Contemplating the Moon by  
Christina Sng*

## VENUS

We'd grown immune  
To the acid,  
To the searing heat.

The genes  
Of volcanic protozoans  
Evolved us

Over ten generations  
From hairless weak humans  
From a devastated Earth

To fire creatures thriving  
On the metallic mountains  
Of Venus.

I stand with my daughter  
On Maxwell Montes, overlooking  
The saffron plains below.

Virga falls,  
Nourishing our galenic plants  
And cyclo-octasulphuric fauna.

She asks, what is that blue orb  
Beyond the haze of darkness  
Between us and the universe?

She knows this  
But I remind her anyway.  
There is so much to remember,

We often forget.  
That is Earth, I tell her,  
Where the first of us came from,

Escaping the world they destroyed  
Through selfishness and greed,  
Unable to agree as one species,

But instead,  
Battling each other  
Till the planet was lost.

Our ancestors swore  
We would not make  
The same mistakes twice.

So we evolved ourselves,  
This time not only  
To survive the harsh land,

But constructing for all of us,  
A pure mind.  
A hive mind.

to get some time to myself, but my body can no longer sustain it.

Now, I'm more interested in what nanotechnology and AI can do, their applications and when they will be implemented. Can they mend us, take away our pain, make the world a better place, reverse climate change? The world has changed immensely in the past 15 years and so have I.

*We love your art! How do you find that creatively as compared to writing?*

It varies. Art takes more extraordinary effort while writing comes more naturally for me.

*There is a recurring figure in your art, the "tendrilled girl." Can you tell me more about her?*

She's mysterious and alien and lives by a tree with her cat and sometimes her children. It's an image I find comfort in.

*You mention toy-making ... That sounds so cool! What kinds of things did you make?*

I made tiny plushies, play sets, wooden blocks. The kids loved them.

*I once asked you about your life's ambitions. What do you see yourself doing in the future?*

I'd love to be a writer and artist full-

## THE CONJURERS

"Grandma,"  
Jack says, as he curls up  
On her lap for a cuddle.  
"Whenever I tell a story,  
It seems to come true."

Grandma raises an eyebrow.  
"How can it be? The world  
Doesn't work that way,  
Not in our world, anyway.  
We have to imagine it."

Grandma and Jack sit  
On the porch, looking up  
Into the dark starry sky,  
Into the many worlds  
Yet imagined and created.

They close their eyes  
And hold hands,  
Conjuring in their minds  
Better worlds  
People can live in.

As he drifts to sleep,  
Jack recites a story:  
"Once upon a time,  
There lived a boy Jack  
And his entire family:

Dad, Mom, Grandma,  
Grandpa, and his sister Jade.  
It didn't matter what world  
They were in, as long  
As they were together..."

time. It's a pipe dream but that's what dreams are. My other dream is to work for Interpol. I have a Criminology degree and am particularly interested in abnormal psychology.

But in reality, I don't know what I'll be doing in the future. My priority is my children and seeing them through these next ten years and beyond. So I will be working towards making that happen.

*So writing isn't your day job? I remember you used to maintain an intranet ...*

I would love for writing to be my day

job. I'm still a coder and I hard code my own websites but no longer an intranet.

*What or who are your major influences? Have these changed over the last fifteen years?*

Sylvia Plath, Linda Addison, and Marge Simon. It hasn't changed in 15 years.

*I asked years ago what favourites you had of your own work. What are your favourites now?*

"Allegra," "Little Red," "Jack and the Giants," "Forest Mother," "The Deer," and "Beyond a Hundred Years" from *A*



*Collection of Dreamscapes.*

*What advice would you have for aspiring writers? What about those who think that it's too late to start writing, or to restart it?*

It's never too late. Start writing.

*You can find out more about Christina Sng and her work at [christinasng.com](http://christinasng.com). She can be found on Facebook ([facebook.com/christinasng](https://facebook.com/christinasng)), Twitter ([twitter.com/christinasng](https://twitter.com/christinasng)), and Instagram ([instagram.com/christinasng](https://instagram.com/christinasng)). She also has an art page at [society6.com/christinasng](https://society6.com/christinasng), and a Patreon page at [patreon.com/christinasng](https://patreon.com/christinasng). And of course you can find her work in a variety of places—as well as in back issues of Penumbric.*



Light in the Darkness by Christina Sng



# Projections

by Colleen Donnelly

Felicia Harding clicked calendar on the screen – next appointment, Melissa Levine. She selected the file icon by the name to quickly review her notes.

Melissa Levine

Case File: 20323

Diagnosis: IIIB colorectal cancer

Plan 1: aggressive -- Surgery, Radiation and Chemotherapy  
Prognosis: Terminal, 5-10 years dependent upon emergent treatments  
Projected Cost: 2M+  
Projected Productive Loss: -300K

Plan 2: supportive, palliative. late-term hospice  
Prognosis: 2-3 years  
Projected Medical Cost: 100-200K

Cost analysis:  
Plan 1 aggressive 2.3 M  
Plan 2 palliative + dependent-support 320K-520K

**Recommendation: Plan 2, net savings 1.7-2 M**

Essential Background Summary

Marital status: Single

Age: 46

Education: B.A. Economics

Profession: Quality Assurance Specialist    Salary: 90K

Mortgage: 180K remaining 20 of 30 years

Retirement: 75K    Life Ins: 100K    Flex Health Savings: 5K

Interests: crafts, yoga, hiking, jazz, avid reader, journals, cooking, gardening, healthy lifestyle choices, travelling

Personality Profile: dependable, pragmatic, devoted parent, fiscally responsible, slightly anxious, non-aggressive, community-minded

Politically liberal, secular persuasion, feminist, non-denominational religious-lite

One child, parents deceased, no adult family members, a few close friends

Dependents:  

Daughter: Grace

Age: 18

Senior    Kennedy High School    GPA 3.8

Aptitude: STEM and music

College-bound, acceptances (see attached).

Interests: Volleyball, band and a cappella, science club, social media-active (8-10 hours a week), sports-averse

Personality Profile: studious, focused, college-bound, feminist, religious curious

No serious dating, group-oriented, nondrinker, nonsmoker

Moderately adventurous, tests boundaries, no abnormal risk- seeking behaviors, average moodiness – all within normal adolescent parameters

Projected College Cost – B.A. 120K (possible post-bac up to 100K)

Living allowance and transition 100K

Supporting materials, analytics available

She clicked and quickly scanned the relevant information her team had harvested and collated from personnel and financial files and social media:

Felicia’s modest office, like that of the other three dozen consultants in the human resources and case management wing of Neurotech Global Inc., which boasted over thirty thousand satisfied employees

who enjoyed parental leave, on-site childcare, stock-sharing, and industry-setting health care benefits, was meant to feel professional and intimate.

In the corner, over her left shoulder, sat a meditation fountain. Water trickled down cascading rocks arranged to resemble an abstract happy Buddha while emanating a softly pulsating glow from within. The dimmer for the overhead lights would activate the barely audible murmuring of undulating waves.

Felicia was only forty, but by allowing her greying roots to show atop her smart bob and sporting large golden wireframe orb-like glasses that she really didn't need, she appeared motherly. Pastel cardigan, neutral single-creased trousers, natural make-up with a hint of pink lip, and a necklace of freshwater pearls completed the uniform. Her mahogany veneer desk was well kept, the computer the main fixture, two or three posed 4 x 6 pictures of children—none her own. On the wall to the right, a typical office painting was mounted, a field of wildflowers in the foreground, painted ladies and swallowtail butterflies flickering among indian paintbrush and bluebells, a grove of aspen giving way to thickening lodgepole pines, the light dimming as the eye travelled back into the foreboding wilderness beyond the trees. In front of her desk, at a slight angle, a slightly weathered cushiony leather chair, seemingly inviting, comforting.

She rose and walked to the door, but before opening it, she rotated the dimmer by the door – the penetrating white light dampened. The glow of the Buddha belly became more prominent as Felicia noted the first crash of the waves. She opened her door and quickly analyzed the demeanor of her client. Ms. Levine had a slightly pained expression; though she clamped her jaw tightly, the twitch of her left eye betrayed her. She jumped slightly when the door opened, clearly both alert and on edge. No one who received a notice to make an appointment with a case manager anticipated good news.

“Ms. Levine, so glad you could come this morning. Hope you haven't been waiting long. Please come in. I am Felicia Harding; please call me Felicia. Have a seat.” Felicia waved Melissa over to

the chair as she orchestrated herself back behind her desk. She adopted her practiced, motherly-concerned look, eyebrows slightly furrowed, elbows on the desk with hands outreaching as she bent slightly forward to appear comforting, consoling. “I know you must feel anxious, but let me assure you, I am here solely for you. Needless to say, you must suspect that something amiss was found in your reports.”

Ms. Levine nodded.

Felicia momentarily pulled her glasses down, seeming to stare dutifully, sympathetically, peering into Ms. Levine's heart. She made her voice waver just a tad, as she lowered her tone to utter the always terrifying edict, “You have cancer.” She could hear the whistle as Ms. Levine gulped back air. “Colorectal cancer. Stage III. I'm sorry to say the prognosis is not good.”

She watched Ms. Levine intently as she delivered the sentence. Ms. Levine seemed to shrink in the chair, head dropping, shoulders caving, as she tried to draw herself into a protective ball. Felicia held her hand out across the desk; Ms. Levine took it. Felicia squeezed and then gently stroked it – limited tactile contact indicating compassion. The desk was the court they'd play across. Sitting in adjacent chairs or together on a couch next to the fountain would invite soulful pats, perhaps a reaffirming hug or two that could complicate the negotiations. Collaboration was a necessarily tightly-controlled, staged illusion.

Ms. Levine withdrew her hand, took a moment to compose and draw herself more upright once again, and asked, “And what exactly are my options?”

Felicia opened a file, a copy of what was on the computer and provided merely for show; she rarely consulted hardcopies, as they were never as up-to-date or easy to browse as what was available on the screen. She took a moment, as if to appear to be thoroughly double checking the information, “Well ...,” she paused for effect, “we seem to have a couple. Given the advanced stage of your cancer, you are looking at extensive, protracted treatment, 50%

chance for a five-year survival rate, and if,” she emphasized the if, “remission is achieved, the survival rate increases to maybe seven years, nine to ten max. We would begin with surgery, removal of the diseased intestine, possibly a colostomy,” details she had memorized both from her training years ago and provided in the addendum to Ms. Levine’s medical file. She watched as Ms. Levine began to once again sink and be swallowed by the chair cushions. “This would be followed by radiation and/or chemotherapy; at this stage you are probably looking at six months, then reassessment, probably about a year out. Likely, as we find in over 80% of the cases at your stage, you are looking at another year or so of treatment consisting of a second and often a third round of chemo and/or radiation. If at that point the cancer is still present, you may try immunotherapy six to eight months, and whatever new treatments become available during the intervening two to three years . . . so long as you qualify for whatever experimental treatments emerge.” She patted Melissa’s hand once again. “I know this is a lot to take in, and it is distressing, but we have found that actually looking at the big picture, being allowed to consider what’s in you and your family’s best interests, being granted the dignity of planning and making choices for yourself, before some doctor burdens you with schedule of treatment, the details of months, the years, of procedures and testing, of physical side effects — not to mention the psychological toll . . . And even when insurance covers it all, having to deal with your life being turned upside-down, the need for supportive care—help cooking, keeping up your home, the inability to work for months on end, not feeling like you are in control of your body or your life, with the indignity of needing someone to help you with your personal, private needs . . . But of course, dear, doctors are constrained by their oath and compelled by their undeterrable desire to heal, after all giving you three years when you could only count on one is a win to them, and for you, they’ll say. Of course, they aren’t suffering day after day or dealing with the constant uncertainty. Have the tumors receded? Is there a change of remission; how long will it last? Another round? What are the side effects this time? How weak will I be? How much time will it take? How much more time will it buy? And then again, another round?”

Ms. Levine was biting her lip. She quivered just a bit. Felicia

thought she could see her mascara run a tad, but Ms. Levine still held herself in control. Now was the time. Felicia frowned just slightly and patted her hand once again, “There is another course of action.” She paused to let Ms. Levine consider and watched for the slight shift in posture, the leaning forward that signaled it was the right time to proceed. “I take it you find this all overwhelming?” No reaction. “I know living with unremittent pain day in and day out and such uncertainty for the rest of my life would terrify me.” Was that a slight nod or tremor? “And what about my family . . . your family?” Ms. Harding seemed to study the file once again, “What about your daughter, Grace, isn’t it?” There is was the audible gulp revealing the unspoken fears and vulnerability.

“She is a senior in high school, correct?”

Ms. Levine nodded.

“Planning to attend college?”

“Yes, she’s been accepted to four schools so far, UCLA, U.C. Santa Barbara, Claremont, and Berkeley; she’s still waiting to hear from Stanford. We are waiting to hear about financial aid, scholarships, grants, the usual.”

“She is a good student, yes? But still, some of those schools are expensive, even with the few thousand in aid most students get. And then there’s books, fees, room and board.”

Ms. Levine nodded again.

“And then to have to deal with . . . this.”

Ms. Levine visibly slumped.

“Would Grace put off college? Of course, she’d want to be by your side and that would be such a gift. It would make your burden so much easier, having your daughter accompany you to treatment, mind the house and help with the chores, support you through it all . . . maybe she could even do a few courses online or at a

community college nearby.”

Ms. Levine shifted her weight in the chair, clearly disturbed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I just assumed.”

Ms. Levine let a tear fall, visibly shaken.

Felicia gently prodded, slowly enunciating each word, “You would, perhaps, prefer she pursue her education? Not put her future on hold?”

Ms. Levine nodded, another gulp, or was it a sob, escaping her throat.

“Hmm ... perhaps we could help?”

Ms. Levine looked up inquisitively.

“What if we could help secure her future in some way?”

Ms. Levine visibly brightened. Felicia had to take care to maintain composure. Her fingertips tingled, as she sensed success now looming. The glow of the Buddha belly appeared to ebb.

“Of course, that would take some sacrifice on your part, Melissa. While we would love to help you and your daughter through this trying time, we do have to consider our other employees, what we can equitably offer to everyone who is part of the Neurotech family under such circumstances, as well as the cost to the company particularly in terms of impairment of such highly skilled individuals as yourself.” Felicia paused. “We need to consider what we at Neurotech could do to best serve you and your daughter.”

Ms. Levine nodded.

Felicia waited. She needed more from Melissa, signaling her willingness to consider any arrangement Felicia might propose.

Forcing herself to exhale, Melissa whispered, “What’s possible?”

Felicia started out slowly, as if cautiously considering the option for the first time. “What if we could act as a guarantor, providing tuition, room and board, a stipend for your daughter, Grace, to live on until she finishes school and secures her first position?”

Melissa’s attention was piqued, and she willed herself to focus.

“Of course, we couldn’t guarantee that forever, cost increases, unforeseen circumstances etc., and who knows how long it will take her to finish school given your condition?”

Melissa slumped a bit.

“You’d agree, it’d be best if she pursued her education and not put it off?”

Melissa shrugged somewhat noncommittally.

“She will not take this well? It will, well, be hard for her to process . . . require her to grow up quickly . . . lose out on some of the experiences girls her age usually indulge in, of course she will want to spend what time remains with you. Her friends, boys, school, they will all still be there later.” Felicia observed Melissa’s shoulders rounding. “Hmmm, perhaps changes in her priorities . . . choices you’d rather she not make?”

Ms. Levine was staring at her lap.

“What is it that you want for your daughter? Would you like her to stay home with you?”

No response.

“Would you like her to go on to school?”

Another shrug, a nod yes.

“But of course, you are worried about how you would cope on your own. Get to your appointments? Keep up at work, with the house? How would you deal with the wretched, debilitating side effects and take care of yourself, alone, at home?” Felicia paused to let Melissa’s imagination propel her anxiety. And then she added, “And when Grace finds out? Do you think she’ll insist on tending to you, suspend her studies or never have the opportunity to start at all? Certainly, she’ll want to share your remaining time with you, be supportive. I know how close a single parent and a child can be,” she nodded and sighed. “And watching that, watching her mother suffer. What that must do to a child, a sensitive young woman such as Grace, a child just becoming an adult herself, choosing to take on adult responsibilities not only for herself but also for an ailing parent.” Felicia was watching Melissa retract into as much of a fetal posture as the chair would allow. As she spoke, she thoughtfully posed her head upon her extended fingers. “I wonder what is best. One has to wonder what such an experience does to a child, watching her mother suffer, watching her waste away, offering an arm to help her walk, lifting her into bed, changing her dressings, holding her head as she gets sick. Certainly, it must make her stronger, more compassionate, empathetic . . . perhaps a bit more melancholy. She must relish the time remaining, time with her suffering parent. One wonders if she can even imagine what she is missing out on in her own young life, those irrecoverable years? How will her choices affect her in the future? Will she be able to pursue her emerging dreams or will those opportunities have already passed her by? Will she still attain a degree? Does she ever meet the young man who would make her happy for decades to come? Does she miss out on chances to travel the country, the world, with friends like herself, young and unattached, before they settle down to raise families and the time for such self-indulgent freedom has passed? Enjoying those twenties that only come once, stumbling and succeeding when the costs are not yet too high?” Felicia basked in the planned pause, and she watched Melissa tremble. “Would it be better, perhaps, for you both to be able to look back on the memories you have shared of vacations, of academic successes, of secrets shared, tears shed, of challenges you overcame together, of scents of home and tastes of holidays, of warm hugs and the sound advice offered by a mother in her prime? The camaraderie . . . of the parent before being reduced

to an invalid needing to be mothered herself.” Felicia paused. “Melissa, what do you want, for yourself, for your daughter?”

Melissa was visibly choking back her sobs, attempting to curl up into herself.

“My heart goes out to you for what you and your daughter will have to go through. It must be so hard to consider what she will be giving up, only to lose you in the end . . . not to mention what suffering you, yourself, will have to endure.” She injected another long pause, allowing Melissa to weigh the words.

“What if, in addition to guaranteeing to pay for school and providing a stipend to live on until Grace gets situated, what if we do our best to help you as well?” Felicia delivered the idea with a note of excitement in her voice; she acted as if surprised by her own ingeniousness, as if she were working out the details of a novel plan for the first time. “Are you committed to surgery, the rounds of radiation and chemo, to the years of suffering, a few good days for many more bad ones to come?”

Melissa was clearly alarmed, as the consideration of the pain she would have to deal with was heaped on top of the other concerns Felicia had clearly posed. “NO,” she groaned.

“What if,” Felicia shuffled through the file, seeming to check a few lines here and there. “What if Grace didn’t have to know? What if you didn’t have to suffer?”

Melissa looked skeptical, but she forced herself to refocus.

“What if we provided you with the care and medication to combat the pain? You could feel like yourself almost to the very end. Virtually pain-free. Grace could go off to school. We would be happy to provide you with a housekeeping service, a personal assistant, say a few hours a month, to manage your household affairs and appointments, and a visiting nurse when you need it. Palliative care and support in your own home, all at no cost.”



Melissa looked intrigued but skeptical.

“Imagine the possibilities.” Felicia appeared to stifle a slight grin. “When Grace visits on vacation, your pain managed, feeling yourself, making plans and together creating a few more special memories without the constant reminders and shared concerns about your impending decline coloring everything you do. And, you will have the comfort of not knowing, but seeing, her take her first steps as the mature young woman you have so successfully raised, not postponing her life, her career, her relationships, and perhaps never realizing her potential; instead you will have the opportunity to see her future begin to unfold.” Did it sound fantastical? “A gift really. You are worried that Grace would know . . . figure it out. We can help. We could provide a personal assistant for when she was home on vacation who could help make sure you looked your best, makeup, hair, make sure your home was up to snuff, arrange appointments and outings so that everything appears relatively normal, unchanged.” Melissa’s eyes looked glassy. Had Felicia gone too far? Perhaps it was best to add a note of realism. “Of course, later on, she will figure it out. We can provide counseling to help her through the final stage. You, you will be able to plan what you want to say, what exactly you want to tell her, you can decide that for yourself or we can provide counsel for you at that time, if you’d like.”

Felicia let it all sink in for a minute.

“Our intent is to allow you to make the decision for yourself, to allow you to decide what is best for you and your daughter. We realize that doctors, the professionals,” she added air quotes, “will tell you there is always hope, that you can be strong and beat the odds. They will encourage you just to keep on trying and tell you that every day is a win. But then, they don’t have to live with the daily pain, the despair, the inability to do the things you used to do, the worries about paying your bills, about what this is doing to your daughter . . . And of course, you are welcome to consult with your doctors, have them detail the scheduled treatment they’d plan for you over the next year or two. And dear, please, please be sure to insist they are honest with you about what you will have to deal with, all of

it, and that they be realistic about the outcomes. One can’t really blame them for dwelling on their few successes, diligently insisting to their patients that they remain optimistic, emphasizing the value of the few extra months they have bought their long-suffering patients, dealing with terminal patients as they do, day after day.”

Melissa sniffled.

“Only you can decide what is best for you and your daughter, and you, of course, should have the opportunity to choose for yourself.”

Melissa stumbled over the words but was finally able to utter, “And if I were to choose not to undergo all that, if I prefer what you are offering, what would I have to do?”

“Well, unfortunately, we are on a tight schedule here, both you and I. I’m sure you and your daughter need to be deciding on what school she will be attend in the next month or so. We would need to secure funds for her in a trust as soon as possible, allow the interest to grow. I’m sure you understand.” Felicia was watching. Melissa would need to be a willing co-conspirator. “We would want to work expeditiously to ensure that over the next few months until Grace goes away to school that you not only appear healthy but that you two can fully enjoy your time together. The longer we wait, the more difficult that becomes. Best to get ahead of things. We would want to start working out the arrangements as soon as possible. And consider, were you to decide on surgery and treatment, certainly the doctors would insist on acting aggressively, since any postponement would decrease your length of survival. Clearly, either way, time is not on your side.”

Melissa nodded, “Of course.”

“There’s just one more thing, dear. Unfortunately, we have to insist on a contract. This protects both you and us. And most importantly, Grace, since we have to make financial arrangements to secure her future. That makes sense, doesn’t it?”

Melissa nodded.

“We have a rather standard contract. You see, these types of arrangements are some of the more, um ... indelicate but necessary services we provide for all our employees here. If we can make even the most difficult times more palatable, then we’ve done our best to make our company feel more like a family. I can print one out now.”

The Buddha belly appeared to swell.

“Of course,” Melissa muttered.

As the printer sang, spitting out pages, Felicia continued, “You can sign now, but don’t worry. Let’s see, it’s Thursday, yes. We can give you until Monday at 8 a.m. to change your mind. You can look over the contract, make sure it is to your satisfaction, and if you find you’d rather reject our generous offer, just contact me before then. However, I’m convinced that the contract will actually assuage any of your fears and put you even more at ease. And when I don’t hear from you, then Monday morning we will start implementing the plan, setting up Grace’s trust, arranging your pain management appointments, a personal assistant an hour a week . . . the contract lays everything out. You’ll be amazed how well we will take care of you! So many burdens lifted; what a relief for you.”

Felicia picked two copies of the contract up from the printer, glanced at the first page to make sure the name was spelled correctly and that it was dated; she shuffled through the pages to make sure they were all there, stood, and placed the contract in front of Melissa, the signature page exposed. She handed her a pen and indicated where she needed to print and sign her name.

Melissa closed her eyes, paused but a few seconds, and then resolutely signed. Felicia picked up the signed copy quickly, deftly sliding it into a closed file, while handing Melissa the second copy. Still standing, assuming just the hint of a smile, she looked at Melissa. “I would like to think I’d make the same brave decision you made. I know you won’t have any second thoughts. Let me extend my sympathies and that of the company’s for what you are suffering through, but again, our hope is that we can help you make the most of your remaining time and help bring you some peace of mind.” She

walked over and opened the door for Ms. Levine, who muttered thank you as she departed.

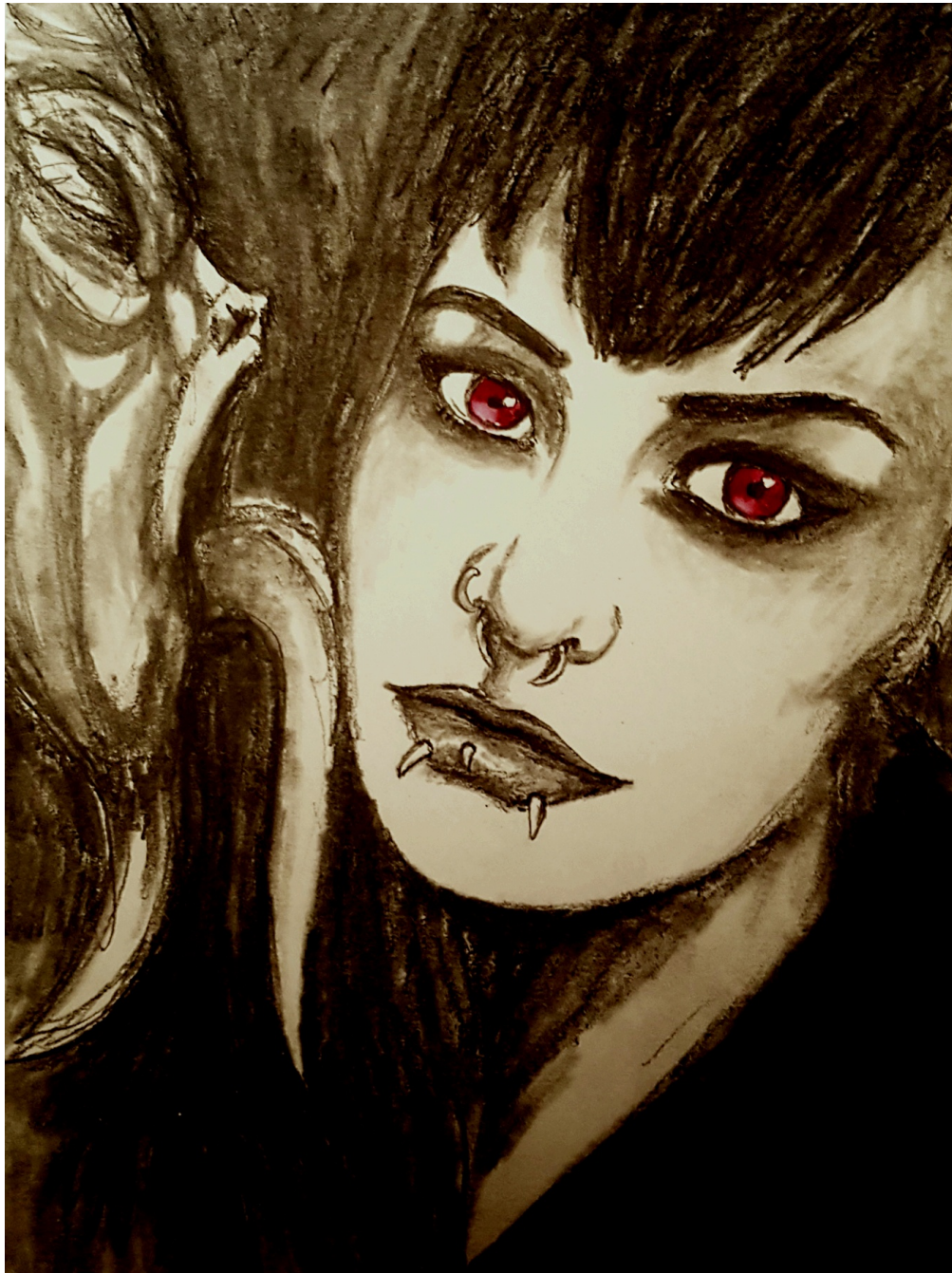
Felicia put her hand on the dimmer, but decided not to turn the lights back up yet.

No one realized how exhausting her position really was, how much it took out of her. Felicia dropped back into her chair, opened Melissa Levine’s file, clicked on the box labelled contract and typed in standard company option, completed and signed. Within five minutes, a gold star appeared next to Ms. Harding’s name on the human resources and case management internal staff listings page. She heard the chime of incoming email. A high priority email appeared in her inbox. Felicity clicked on:

Congratulations, Felicia Harding, you have reached the \$10,000,000 corporate savings goal for the 12th quarter in a row. This places you in our golden employee circle and earns you an all expense paid trip – 3 days, 2 nights, Antigua. Please contact [rewards@neurotech.org](mailto:rewards@neurotech.org) to make arrangements. Your accomplishment will be recorded in your personnel file. Please [click here](#) to view your progress toward your next salary adjustment and promotion status.

Neurotech Global commends you and thanks you for your continued service.

Felicia clicked, fireworks filled the screen and the bar glowed: she could expect a 3% raise effective July 1, and after three years of consistently being in the top ten for corporate savings – she had almost qualified earlier but had fallen out of the top ten for a quarter when hit with a rather inconvenient bout of pleurisy – she had finally cemented her promotion. As soon as a position opened, she would move up the corporate ladder and finally become a manager, train her own staff and no longer have to conduct sessions with employees herself. Tonight, she could celebrate with a bottle of cabernet sauvignon and petit filet mignon, medium rare. For now, she typed in “rewards” to book her well-earned long weekend.



# The Kiss of the Beast

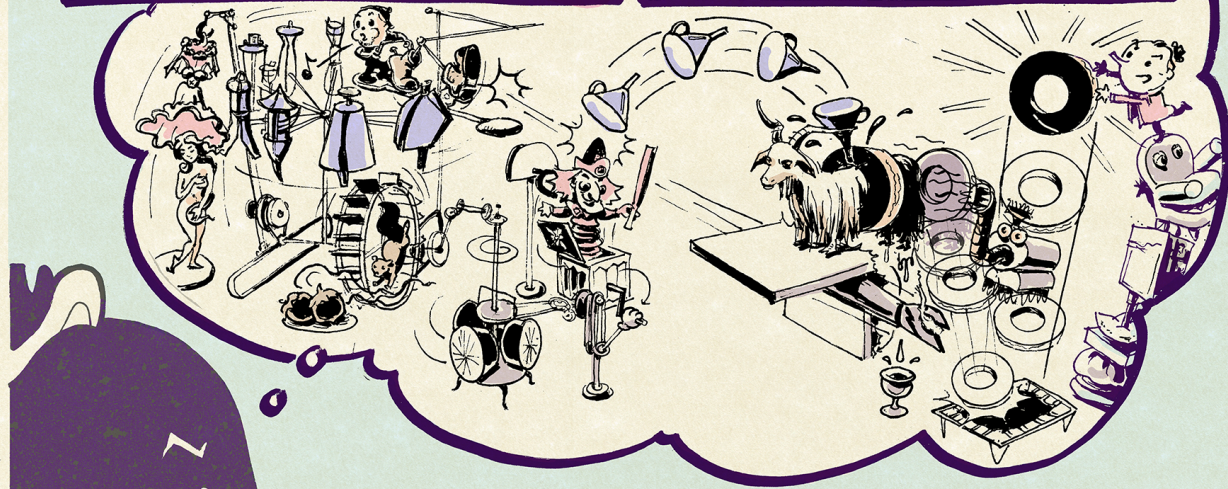
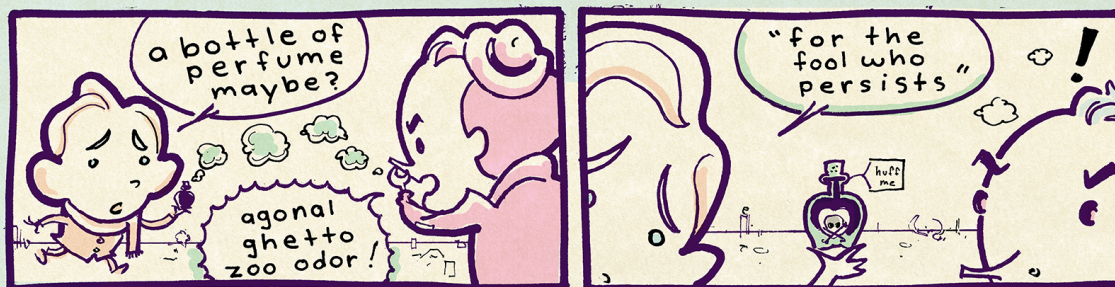
by Novyl the  
Mysterious



# The ROAD TO **GONGNOOZA!**

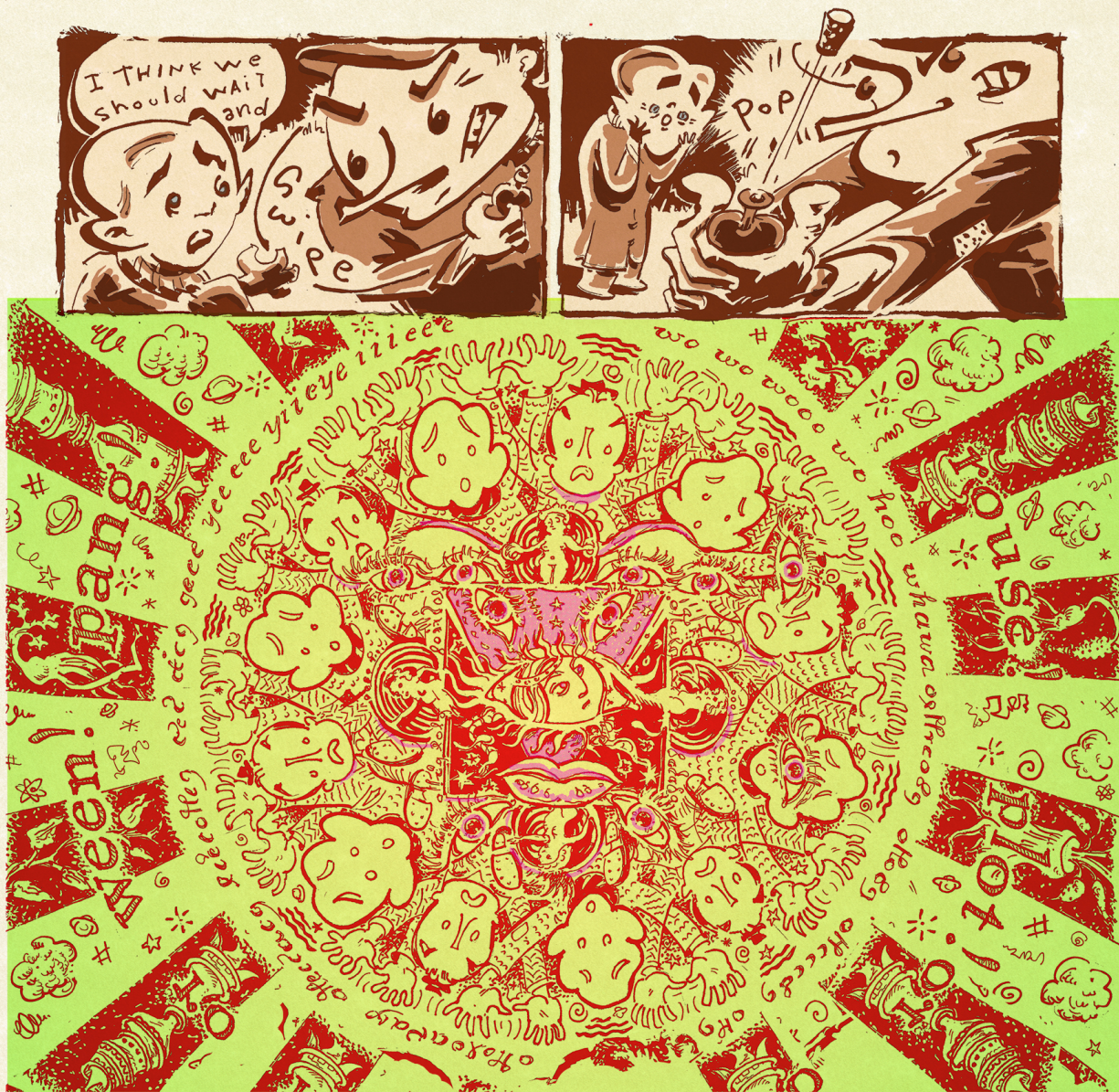




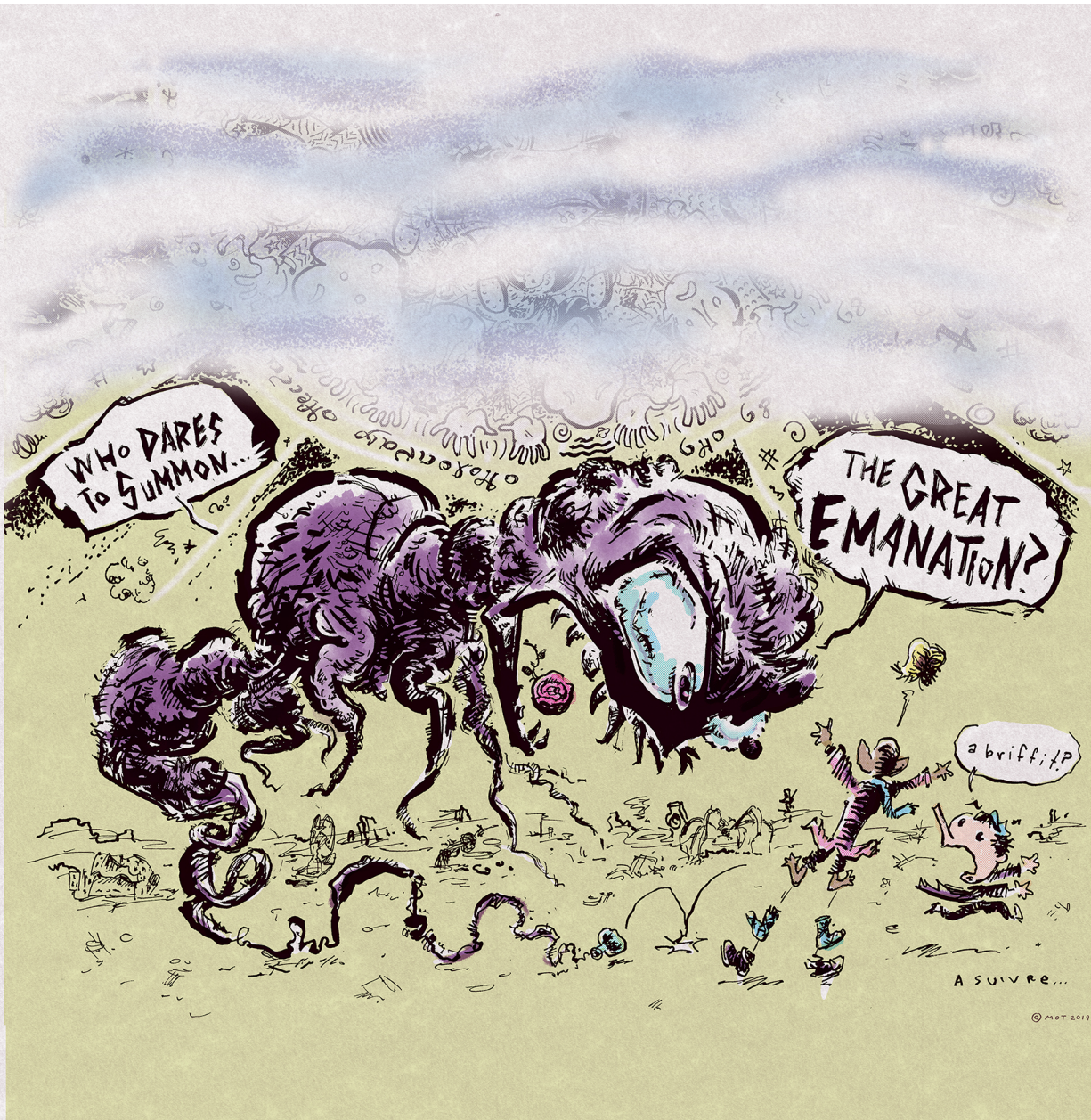


GOAT OOZE DONATOR G.L.O'H.











# Contributors :

M.C. BloV8, masthead and anagrams,  
recently had a career retrospective at NYC's *Fugitive Gallery*.  
He can be reached care of Singing.



Gonzo Loretta O'Hagood, page two,  
received last year's Pini Award for her webcomic,  
*Ginger Duck and her Barnyard Friends*.  
[yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com](http://yourdailydoodle.tumblr.com)



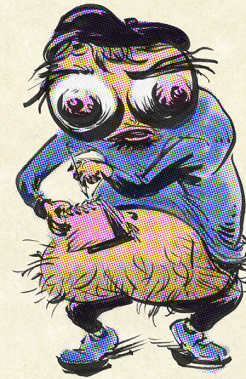
Cassie Motswald, page 3, panels 1 & 2,  
hosts the monthly  
*Captain Crayon's Crap-Art Contest*  
at T. Martooni's.  
Her Instagram : @cmot15

Jacqueline Pharmakos, page 3 mandala,  
is best known for her psychedelic set designs  
off off Broadway in *Helter Skelter, the Musical*,  
but she also makes comics.  
[cartooniologist.blogspot.com](http://cartooniologist.blogspot.com)



M. Isaac Cartozia, page 4,  
chronicles the adventures of  
*Conan Doyle, Barbarian Detective*  
at [cartozia.com](http://cartozia.com)

T. Motley is the author of *The Road to Golgonooza*, a fake jam comic. [tmotley.com](http://tmotley.com)



# Consumed

by Grace Wagner

The sky flared with the neon colors of sunset, reflecting the river of advertisements on the streets below. The wind caught a length of tangled plastic, whirling it around so that for a moment, it looked almost alive—a jellyfish caught in the currents between skyscrapers. But all such precious, fragile things were gone from this planet. The city pulsed with the rhythm of the shifting advertisements that lined the streets, flickering and brilliant.

Emerson Crane clutched a filing box full of her office decorations to her chest, tears flowing freely down her face. The crowd around her was collectively engrossed in their phones and paid no attention as she navigated through the crush towards the lightrail station. That morning as she rode the train to work, the sky had been a clear, brilliant blue. It had seemed a good omen to Emerson. Having just finalized her divorce from the woman who had broken her heart, she thought that the world seemed a little brighter than usual.

Wiping the tears from her face with the back of her hand, she found a seat on the overcrowded train. Beside her a teenager stared blank-eyed at his phone, watching ad after ad – first for a new shoe company (Treat your feet with Cheetah Shoes!), then a series of loosely connected shots of a car driving through mountains. She watched the teen watching commercials, focusing on the blonde roots above a green dye-job that needed to be touched up. Her ex-wife’s hair was that blonde before she dyed it brown to look more “managerial.” Emerson looked away.

Her phone rang. An ad popped up on the screen, which she skipped so she could answer the call.

“Hello?” She tried to sound in control, but her voice shook.

*Have you recently been let go, fired, laid off, left behind? Do you need a way to make money quick? Stay on the line and a representative will tell you about your rights.*

Emerson hung up.

Outside the train, the city glowed in the falling dark. Posters plastered the city in a layer of florid enticements to buy things. Since the passage of the Corporate Free Speech Act, every surface seemed fair game. From the train, Emerson watched the scrolling ads projected on the face of the state capitol building.

Her phone went off again, this time a text.

*Hey, Em. It was Claire. I heard what happened.*

Emerson sent back a gif of a woman collapsing down a staircase, followed by three more gifs flashing the word *dying* in front of tragic expressions.

*Let me know if you feel up to brunch this 'end, maybe Sat? <3*

Emerson put the phone back in her pocket.

She still couldn’t believe she’d lost her job – couldn’t believe it as she stood in her boss’s office, hands full of daily reports, couldn’t believe it as she packed her small ceramic mouse with its jaunty party hat into the filing box to take home, couldn’t believe it as she made her way off the lightrail and five blocks down to her studio apartment that barely had room for a bed and her desk.

She’d believed she was safe from automation. How could they get



rid of the person who reads what the machines report? But some programmer in some corporate cubicle found a way. Her hands were cold with dread. She'd never get another job. When automation first devastated blue-collar jobs, she'd been happy with the new efficiencies. Now it had moved on to middle management and there were almost no jobs left except at the very top administrative levels. But no one would hire her to be a CEO of a major corporation. Those advancements were all internal promotions and often handed down from family member to family member.

At home, she set the box down just inside the door. The wall-screens flashed on and she logged into her home network. Her "Evening Cool Down" playlist started automatically after a short five-second video advertising the latest K-Pop album. No option to skip this time. Her subscription to the ad-free version had been tied to her job. Across the bottom of the wall-screen, the news scrolled across. MORE ATTACKS BY ROGUE ANARCHISTS. THREATS ISSUED. WILL THE PRESIDENT ACT? It felt like never a day went by without a new attack. If she were a CEO she might have felt threatened, but everybody knew the anarchists only went after people at the top.

Target, her cat, greeted her with a perfunctory *pur-mrow* and headed to the kitchen where his food bowl waited. She sighed and followed him. She clicked through a couple of menus on the food printer's screen and selected the cheapest cat food, suddenly conscious of every credit that left her account. The credit-counter on the screen ticked down a couple of points as she opened the flap and took out the printed cat food. She couldn't afford to buy her own food printer, but her apartment came with a rental. She paid 25 credits monthly for the privilege, that on top of the price of ingredients, which were calculated one print at a time and subtracted from her account.

Her kitchen, like the rest of her apartment, was clean and efficient. Her furniture all had a look of Scandinavian simplicity. There was little in the way of pure ornamental decoration. Everything had a purpose. Well, not quite everything. Her office featured several odd statues—a face in either torment or ecstasy, a jellyfish cast in porcelain, and a recreation of the Nike of Samothrace statue,

bewinged and headless.

She opened the fridge. It was empty except for an unopened bottle of white wine that Claire had given her for her birthday a couple of weeks back. It'd been forever since she had wine. Real wine, too, from California. Fifty percent real grapes, which was enough to make it expensive. She poured herself a large glass and grabbed her laptop.

She pulled up the search bar—*Job listings Denver*. 1,042 results found. Slowly she worked her way down the listings, mostly for sex workers or highly technical fields like cardiovascular surgeon or mechanical engineer. She made it through all 1,042 listings and the bottle of wine without any luck. She closed her laptop and went to bed.

The next morning, her bedroom wall-screens flashed on at 6:30, her normal wake-up time. An image of an old fashioned alarm clock danced near her bed. She waved her hand to dismiss the alarm, but she couldn't recapture sleep. Her head rang slightly from the wine, and a tension headache pulsed at her temples. Grudgingly, she crawled out of bed.

She paid 7 credits for a cup of coffee, and after drinking it, she began to feel human again. After two, she felt up to taking a shower and getting dressed. Her phone flashed a notification. Another text from Claire. A picture of a sloth hugging another sloth. She smiled and sent back a heart emoji.

At least she had Claire. Claire had been her friend since secondary school. Claire, the eternal optimist, was a nice counterpoint to Emerson's pragmatic pessimism. She decided to meet up with Claire on Saturday and pour out her feelings over a brunch she probably couldn't afford.

*You know what? I'm free Sat. Free whenever lol : ( Let's do brunch.*

What she could afford. Well, that was basically nothing at this point. She had some savings, maybe enough for a couple of weeks if she was frugal, but even her seemingly secure middle management position barely paid enough to keep up with her student loan debt and her daily expenses. She'd also been required to dress with a certain level of formality and only recently had purchased a new wardrobe in anticipation of getting that promotion she'd been promised a year and a half ago. She looked through her closet of muted greys and beiges, running her hands along the impeccably sewn seams and clean lines. Some of them still had the tags on. She pulled those out and put them in a reusable shopping bag. Those, at least, she could return.

Taking a break, she stared into her empty fridge for several minutes before closing it and having another cup of coffee. 21 credits already this morning and she hadn't even fed the cat. Her phone rang its shrill jingle, shattering the silence of the morning.

*Have you recently been let go, fired, laid off, left behind? Do you need a way to make money quick? Stay on the line and a representative will tell you about your rights.* The voice was friendly, but it was hard to tell if it was human. So many robo-calls these days.

She hung up again, though this time she hesitated. Maybe it wasn't just spam. But how did they know she'd been fired? She sighed. Targeted advertising had gotten so good these days that it felt almost magical, in a vaguely uncomfortable way, as though a bit of magic crept out of her phone and shivered down her spine.

She grabbed the shopping bag full of clothes and walked out into the rain.

She was able to return the clothes for two thirds of the original prices. She'd go through her closet again to pick out anything she could get some credits for at one of the many secondhand clothing stores that dotted the mall. They called it a mall, and it was

something like those big buildings she'd visited as a child, but instead of a single building, this mall was comprised of about seven city blocks worth of stores and restaurants. She actually lived on the edge of the mall in one of the high-rises built above a block of stores. She could maybe get a job in retail, although those jobs were diminishing and retail workers at the higher end stores had almost no job turnover. Who would quit a steady source of income these days?

She stopped by the cheapest Chinese restaurant in the mall and paid ten credits for a small take-out portion of fried rice and went home. Target, named for the retail giant's spot-eyed mascot whom he resembled, was waiting for her at the door. She sighed. Another mouth to feed.

Perhaps she could sell her statues. There were some buyers still interested in handmade pieces. They were collectors of sorts. And she'd made the statues herself. That's what she'd studied, in fact, back in the days when the government still subsidized student loans, though what they offered hadn't been enough to cover tuition. She'd taken out private loans to cover the gap. She left school \$40,000 in debit. Now she owed seventy, thanks to interest rates. Seventy thousand dollars or 140,000 credits. A new program had started recently that allowed people to pay off loans with digital credits which, being an unregulated currency, had already become vastly inflated so that 1 credit was worth basically nothing. You could buy a piece of gum, maybe.

Her phone rang. She started to skip the advert that autplayed when the phone started ringing, but then hesitated. She could get a credit for watching it, so she did. It was a porn advert, with two women softly kissing as they undressed. At least the algorithms had gotten good enough to stop showing her so much male-gazey, heterosexual porn that she had absolutely no interest in. This ad was almost loving, as the cameras caressed the women's thighs and breasts. She clicked the like button to encourage the algorithm to continue showing her this sort of content in the future.

The ad ended and she answered the phone.

*Have you recently been let go, fired, laid off, left behind? Do you need a way to make money quick? Stay on the line and a representative will tell you about your rights.* The cajoling voice felt almost human.

She didn't hang up this time.

*Mrs. Crane?* A voice that sounded very much like a real person came over the phone.

"It's 'Miss' Crane," she said. "I'm not married."

A beep sounded from the line. *Noted,* said the voice. Perhaps it really was a human, though Emerson had trouble believing that about any telemarketing call these days. *It has come to our attention that you may need supplemental income after your loss. Condolences, by the way. Are you interested?*

It should have been odd hearing the language of death associated with a job loss, but, she supposed, it wasn't altogether inappropriate. Was she grieving? She thought so.

*We are here to explain your rights. You may qualify for a special welfare assistance program, newly implemented by Washington, that may help alleviate your financial burden,* the voice continued in its familiarly friendly if flat tone.

Half-listening, Emerson paced her apartment. Maybe she could take up art again, see if she could land any corporate patronage. But she didn't have studio space anymore. Hadn't for years. Not to mention the money needed for supplies. She sighed, trying to focus on the call.

*Do you have any questions?*

Crap. She hadn't been listening. "No," she said, "thank you. Could you maybe email me the information so I have it easily in hand?"

*Of course,* said the voice. *Sent. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.* The call disconnected.

She threw her phone onto the bed. Great. Welfare. That's just what she needed. Her stubborn side took over and she knew she wouldn't be bending that particular knee until she was a bit more desperate. She looked around the apartment. How desperate was she?

Feeling suddenly cold, she took out several layers of long-sleeves and the two blankets from her bed, and crawled into the back of the closet like she used to do when she was a child. She rocked herself to sleep, tears staining her cheeks in slow rivulets.

She awoke to a fierce banging on the front door.

"Em? Em, it's me. You missed brunch!"

Emerson emerged from the closet, with hair disheveled and the fading impression of her blanket's fabric on her right cheek. She opened the door.

Claire froze, looking at her best friend with concern.

"Morning," said Emerson, moving aside so Claire could come in.

"More like afternoon," said Claire, who dropped her bag on a side table. Claire was an editor, though the job looked nothing like the jobs of editors from days past. She mainly read auto-generated content to check for any tech-ese or failed autocorrects. She hadn't had a real writer to edit in years. "I brought you some presents."

"Oh you really didn't have to do that," protested Emerson. "I'm fine. I promise. I just had a rough night."

"Honey, you've had a rough life," said Claire.

"Not as bad as some." Emerson tried to smile.

“Bad enough,” said Claire. “Here. Let’s hug it out.”

Claire stepped across the room and wrapped her slender, freckled arms around her friend. Emerson sighed and laid her head against Claire’s shoulder. She’d almost forgotten what physical comfort felt like.

After a few tears and a few nips—Claire had brought whiskey!—Emerson felt ready to talk. Claire would understand. Emerson took up the bottle and poured herself another shot. Claire had a liquor connection that she wouldn’t even tell Emerson about. Black market stuff. Top secret, she’d say and smile.

Emerson explained about the calls she’d been getting, the new welfare program. Claire listened intently.

“But what do you have to *do*?” asked Claire.

“I’m not sure, tbh. I think there’s some app I have to download. Let me check the email.”

*Miss. Emerson Crane*

*Thank you for your interest in participating in our supplemental income pilot program (SIPP). SIPP offers opportunities to offset your recent loss or decrease in income through your providing valuable insights and market research. To participate, download the SIPP app, input your demographic information, answer a few short lifestyle questions, set up your payment information, and upload a picture of yourself. Your electronic devices must be compatible with ACCUTRACK facial recognition software. Please note that any attempts to commit fraud will result in termination from the program and a report to local authorities. Thank you again, and please remain available for future contact from our staff.*

“I’m still not sure what I have to do, lol.” Emerson rubbed her raw eyes.

“Is your phone compatible?” asked Claire.

“I think so.”

“Then let’s get the app. I’ll help you get set up.”

Emerson located the app on the app store and they both stared at the phone as it downloaded bit by bit. After the installation process finished, the app opened automatically. *Welcome*, said a voice that sounded very much like the one from the phone calls, *to the Supplemental Income Pilot Program or SIPP. Do you have a moment to set things up?*

Emerson clicked yes. She stated her age, previous income, and outstanding debt.

*Thank you!* said the voice. *Please check off any of the following brands you prefer.* More than a hundred brands scrolled down her screen. Slowly, Emerson and Claire navigated through the tutorial introduction.

“So in order to earn money ...,” said Claire.

“Credits,” corrected Emerson.

“In order to earn credits,” said Claire, “all you have to do is watch advertisements and take surveys on them?”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

“Well that doesn’t sound too bad.” Claire stood and stretched. “You just get to sit around watching ads all day.”

“For things I’ll never be able to buy,” said Emerson, a sinking feeling in her stomach. “And I’ll only be able to use the credits with sponsored vendors.”

“Yeah, but that includes Target, Amazon, and the Food Printer Suppliers, so that’s good.”

Emerson nodded silently, turning to stare out the window. The flicker



of street adverts pulsed in the early twilight.

Claire patted Emerson reassuringly on the shoulder. “Hey, I’m going to go get us some cheap Chinese.”

Emerson finished off the last of the lifestyle surveys, feeling some measure of regret for the information she’d had to hand over. She’d always understood that privacy was a part of the past, an anachronism much like horse-drawn carriages and dial telephones, but still she regretted it.

Finally a button popped up, *Earn rewards now!* She clicked it and was immediately taken to a screen with a bright, flashing ad for a downloadable game. She watched the colorful jewels line up and disappear, a cash-register sound jarring her as the fake player won the jackpot. She turned to the window.

*Warning*, said the voice. *Penalties will accrue if you fail to look at the screen.* She turned back to the ad. So that’s what the facial recognition software was for, to guarantee that she watched the screen.

Her eyes glazed over as she watched three more ads. *20 credits earned!* said the voice with a flat enthusiasm. *Keep going!*

Wow, thought Emerson. Twenty credits for fifteen minutes. Maybe this would be easy after all.

Three days in, she’d earned enough credits to restock her food printer. When she woke up in the morning, an ad played across her wall-screen. She could mute it or pause it if she didn’t mind incurring penalties, but she’d stopped doing that after day one. An ad played as she brushed her teeth. Another as she got dressed, keeping her head rotated towards the screen at all times.

She’d already learned the careful art of zoning out. Her eyes would point in the correct direction, but her mind would be off processing

some event from her childhood or a daydream of going outside the city. Not that anyone was allowed out of the city, except by special permit, but the idea of it fascinated her. She imagined walking down a path, a canopy of pine needles above her. Her screen played a trailer for the next big blockbuster. Did she think she would watch it? She clicked no and received 2 credits. Next time she would try clicking yes. Did it even matter if she lied? Maybe she would get more credits.

She kept count of her credits obsessively. She would need 300 more credits if she was going to be able to make rent this month. She’d given up coffee. At seven credits a cup, it was a luxury she just couldn’t afford. She reached down and stroked her cat, who purred contentedly. She hadn’t had to miss feeding him since she started the SIPP program.

*You have one message*, rang out the voice. She opened the message on her phone. *Take advantage of our latest mobile application! Watch ads on the go! Walk by stores to get proximity ads and extra credits!* Proximity ads, she thought. Well, she hadn’t left the house in three days. Maybe she should go out and get a little sun. As she walked the streets of the mall, ads flared across wall-screen after wall-screen, following her down the street. She turned her head methodically from one ad to the next. 10 credits. Was it just her or was the reward for each ad getting smaller?

She stopped sleeping. She’d fall asleep watching ads only to be awakened by the insistent voice warning against penalties. Ad on the lightrail for the latest in AI-crafted beers. Ad at the local Chinese take-out place for travel vouchers to China. Ad at home for the newest iteration of the iPhone/Pad/Macbook/home computing device. Ads between every song of her playlists. Ads that were songs so that they blended in. Catchy. She found herself singing the lullabies of capitalism. Consume. Consume. Consume, she sang softly as the food printer made a roasted chicken breast.

She continuously sent out her opinions on ads. She liked this one. Disliked that one. This was relevant, that was not. She began to feel like a cloth wrung through with grease, a cold, leaden feeling that

congealed behind her eyes.

Day ten and she began considering poverty. Perhaps she should ignore some ads some of the time. 113 credits to go to make rent. Porn ad after porn ad after porn ad. 97 credits to go. She just had to make rent. She sat down in the middle of the floor, propped her head up with a pillow so she was facing the screen. Outside, the light faded into a sickly pink, the sky flushed and feverish.

Claire called. Emerson let it roll to voicemail.

53 credits and one day to go. She answered survey after survey. She hadn't eaten today. Did she yesterday? She couldn't remember. She pulled up the ads on the wall-screen so she didn't have to hold the phone. The walls of her apartment rang with the sounds of women laughing over salads. Of men putting on deodorant and becoming instantly attractive. Of washing machines removing grass stains—she missed going outside. Of pretty blondes hocking weight loss programs. Of all the sordid and empty things that can be purchased with one quick click. Yours at reduced cost! 23 credits to go. 22. 21... Emerson collapsed in the middle of an ad for the latest social shopping network. Exhausted, her eyes locked shut and she slept.

Rent was due in the morning.

Emerson dragged herself into consciousness at noon. She'd missed her rent payment. Waiting for her on her phone was an eviction notice. 24 hrs to leave or sign a new lease at an increase of 150 credits per month. What could she do? She called Claire.

"You've what??" shouted Claire over the phone. There was a lot of noise in the background. She must be out doing something.

"I'm being evicted!" Emerson shouted.

"Seriously??"

"Yeah... can I ... can I stay with you? Just until I find a place?"

"Of course, love! Go ahead and pack. I'll swing by after this luncheon."

Emerson hung up, looked around. She packed what clothes she had left. Used the rest of her printer ingredients to print some shelf stable foods, salami, hard cheeses, etc. She wasn't going to leave the next tenant any extra ingredients. She packed up her three statues. The cat's bowl and toys. She posted on craigslist all of her furniture, which was snapped up with surprising speed. The last bookcase was being hauled out of the apartment by two skinny men in glasses when Claire showed up.

"Wow, that was efficient," Claire said, looking around the empty loft.

Emerson said nothing. She stared out her one large window. Below her, the street gleamed. Everything was shiny or shimmering or attractively lit to show off the products on display. She wondered what true darkness looked like. She wondered what night looked like away from these pulsing, vibrating lights. The continual phosphorescence felt exhausting. Everything felt exhausting. She put her hand against the cool glass.

"Uhm ... need a minute?" Claire asked.

"No." Emerson picked up the kitty carrier, put a large duffel bag over her shoulder, and grabbed her suitcase. Claire picked up the box containing the statues. Together, they left the tiny apartment behind.

Emerson adjusted fairly easily to her new surroundings. Claire had been doing well at work and, when she received her bonus last year, she moved into a little two bedroom townhouse. The second room was Claire's office and library, so Emerson slept on the couch. She didn't log in to the app for two days, preferring instead to leaf through Claire's collection of physical books, inherited from her

father, who had been known simply as the Professor.

On the third day, Emerson received an email.

*Miss Crane,*

*It has come to our attention that you have failed to meet the minimum number of hours required by the licensing contract. If you do not resume your regularly scheduled viewing in the next 24 hours, you will be removed from the rolls and, once removed, you will be blocked from rejoining the program. If there's anything we can assist you with, please do not hesitate to contact our support services line.*

So Emerson watched an ad. She kept watching until Claire came home. Emerson showed her the email.

“WTF,” was all Claire said.

“I was wondering ...” Emerson began, then blushed and looked away. It was an idea she’d been toying with since she moved in. “You know your, uhm, contacts? For whiskey and wine and whatnot?”

“Yes ...” said Claire, hesitant. She’d always been very close-mouthed about how she picked up these rare items.

“Do you think they would be interested in buying my statues?”

“But you can’t sell those!” Claire protested. “They’re all you have left of who you were before.”

“Before?”

“Before all this. Before that soul sucking job you pretended to love. Before you resigned yourself to this corporate hellhole. When we still believed in something, you know?” Claire had always been sentimental.

“But I need to eat, and I can’t keep doing this.” Emerson gestured at

her phone. “I’m going crazy. I watch until I sleep. I wake up and the notifications are already dinging. Everywhere I go, I’m followed. I feel guilty for NOT watching ads. I feel guilty for wanting things I can’t have. I can’t do this. I’m done.” As she said it, she knew it was true.

Claire looked at her without saying anything for a couple of minutes. Then she nodded.

“Okay. I think I can help.”

“You’ll help me sell the statues?”

Claire shook her head. “No, but there may be another way. Let me get back to you.” She gave Emerson a quick hug and left without saying where she was going.

Anger burned through Emerson. Anger at her friend for not telling her what was going on. Anger at the program and the companies who utilized it. Anger at her old job that robbed her of her sense of self. Anger at the river of advertisements out there on the streets. She logged into her laptop, and wrote.

It was a rant, a manifesto. It was a cri-de-coeur. It wasn’t enough. She wrote anonymously and submitted it to a well-known blogsite. In the first hour, she had 200 likes. In the next, 20,000. It was happening. She was going viral. In the next three hours, she was being interviewed by several well-known bloggers. And Claire still wasn’t back yet. Then there was a knock on the door.

Emerson opened it to find three men in dark gray suits.

“Miss Crane?” the tallest one said. Emerson had a hard time telling them apart except by height. They all had the smashed faces of boxers, the broad jaw of some predatory animal.

“No.” Her mind raced. Who were these people? She felt incredibly threatened. “My name is Claire.”

The tall man looked at his tablet and back at Emerson.

“Our records indicate that you are, in fact, Emerson Crane, enrolled in the SIPP program. You have violated the terms and conditions you agreed to by downloading the SIPP app.”

“What? How?”

“You have publically disparaged the program. You’ll have to come with us.”

The two shorter men stepped forward, each taking an arm. Emerson tried to wrench herself free, but they were strong. Too strong.

“But ... but what about my cat?”

No response. They turned, and, with Emerson firmly between them, marched her down to the pulsing street and shoved her into a black SUV.

They took her to a drab office building a few blocks away from downtown. As one unit, they walked through the security gate at the front entrance, checked Emerson for weapons or sharp objects, and deposited her in an olive green waiting room.

“Am I being arrested?” she asked the tall man.

“Arrested? Of course not. Does this look like a police station?”

Emerson looked around the room. It looked like any waiting room. There were even magazine codes you could scan with your phone for reading material.

“You’re simply being detained until it can be determined if you committed fraud. Then you’ll be arrested.” He grinned and stepped out. Emerson was alone in the room. She heard the door lock.

She texted Claire.

*Fuck!* was Claire’s response. Emerson stared at the “typing” symbol. It felt like forever before Claire’s next message came through. Stay there. *We’re going to try to get you out. Be prepared to follow any and all instructions even if it’s from someone you don’t know.*

*Okay*, Emerson responded.

Ten minutes later, a woman came in to take Emerson’s fingerprints. Emerson eyed the woman, but the woman said only “Give me your fingers.” Then Emerson was alone again.

Half an hour later, an explosion rang out somewhere close. A different woman, frazzled, rushed in.

“It’s the anarchists,” she shouted. “They’ve set off bombs across the city. We’ve got to get you somewhere safe. Come with me.” The woman turned away from the security camera in the corner and winked.

Emerson followed her out of the building. Outside police sirens fractured the night. The woman took Emerson by the elbow and led her away from the scene to a waiting van. Emerson started to panic, maybe this wasn’t the right person. Maybe she was finally being arrested. Or worse. Her mind raced, but she couldn’t stop it.

“Em,” a voice whispered from inside the van. “Get in.”

Emerson smiled and jumped inside. She knew that voice. Claire.

“You don’t look the worse for wear,” Claire said once Emerson was in the van. “Did they rough you up?”

Emerson shook her head. “No, but I didn’t fight them.” She looked at the bruises on her wrists. “Except for these, I mean, when they grabbed me.”

Claire looked at the bruises. “It could have been worse.” The van,



running on autopilot, made its way down the street.

“Where are we going?” Emerson asked.

“We’re leaving the city.” Claire touched Emerson’s cheek. “Well, you are.”

“Leaving the ... but that’s illegal. Without a permit.”

Claire grinned. “That’s why we have the right permits. For your sister at least.”

“I don’t have a sister, Claire, you know that.”

“Ah, but does the government? I have a friend that added her to the system. And another friend made you this passport.” She winked at Emerson. “My friends do good work on short notice. They’ve had practice.”

Emerson took the proffered passport and stared down at her face. It was definitely her face, but if the government agents thought she was her newly created sister, they might ignore the facial recognition software picking her out.

“Here, take this,” said Claire, holding out a pill.

“What is it?”

“Xanax so you don’t panic. It’ll help you lie better.”

Emerson swallowed the pill.

“When you leave the city, you’ll need to drive manually. There are no magstrips out there.”

“But I can’t drive. I don’t know how!” Emerson tried not to panic. She felt the anxiety roiling her stomach. How long until the meds kicked in?

Claire thought for a minute. “Can you ride a bike? There’s an old messenger bike in the back.”

Emerson remembered when she was five, maybe six, falling down repeatedly as she tried to learn. Eventually she’d been able to wobble down the road, but that was more than two decades ago.

“I think so,” she said.

“Well you won’t have to go far before the patrols pick you up.”

“The patrols?”

“The anarchists. They’ve got a commune somewhere outside the city. In the mountains. They do regular patrols around the city to pick up anyone lucky enough to escape.”

Claire explained what to expect and Emerson did her best to listen. Claire also said she’d take care of the cat, and try to get Emerson’s things to her, when it was less dangerous. Just before the outskirts of the city, Claire stopped the car, hugged Emerson fiercely, and stepped out into the night. Emerson, now truly alone, felt a calmness descend over her. She took a deep breath and started the van. It followed the magstrips to the edge of the city.

“Business?” asked the guard at the checkpoint, his black uniform blending into the shadows.

“I have a job interview in Dallas. But I don’t have the credits for a flight.”

He shined a light into the van. “Job interview? That seems unlikely.”

Emerson handed him the paperwork and the fake passport.

He flipped through the paperwork. “Everything seems in order. Well, good luck with the interview. You’ll need it.” He stepped back into the shadows. The flashlight waved her through. One mile out of the city, the car stopped. She’d reached the end of the magstrips.

She dug through the junk in the van and pulled out an old bicycle, its paint peeling away. She steadied herself, made a couple of false starts, then pedaled slowly, wobbling into the night.

The city glowed behind her, staining the night clouds pink and yellow. After a few more miles, she understood darkness. Not the complete darkness of a room with no windows or lights, but rather, a natural darkness. A milky, blue and purple darkness. A swirling darkness littered with stars. She got off the bike and looked up at the heavens. It seemed to move and rotate, twisting in the soft moonlight.

She heard a branch break off to the side of the road. Eyes wide, she spun, putting the bike between her and the noise.

“Emerson Crane?” a voice said out of the darkness.

This time, she said yes with no hesitation. They knew she was coming. Three people stepped out of the darkness, switching on a

flashlight. She smiled. There was an older woman, still fit and fighting, it looked like. A young man, maybe eighteen years old at the oldest, and another woman who looked to be Emerson’s age.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” said the older woman.

Introductions were made and the group turned towards the mountains.

Finally, Emerson would get to see the mountains. She felt their presence through the dark. Heavy, old, and certain of their place in the world. She turned once more to look back towards the city. In the night, the stain from the city lights looked like a sore, a bruise on the night sky.

Emerson turned away, feeling the weight of the mountains in front of her. She was going home.

# Smoke and Shadows and Magic

by Novyl the  
Mysterious



# All You Can Eat

by Mark Anthony Smith

The streets are quiet for a Saturday afternoon. There are lots of Newspaper sheets blowing about in the wind and dust everywhere. It's foggy too. There are few cars and no-one seems to have an appetite for shopping anymore. John smiles at the cliché of the City looking like a ghost town. It is the first thought that has entered his head since worrying about meeting Cynthia.

They had met online. It is all the rage these days. Cynthia likes horror films, trips abroad, and is fed up with meeting Psychos. John thinks the same. There are lots of fake profile pictures or people with too many hang-ups. He just wants an easy life. Nothing too serious. Just a few laughs and someone to lend an ear on occasion. Cynthia isn't interested in material things. She likes eating out and a man with a good sense of humour.

John is attracted to Cynthia's photo of her Windsurfing somewhere in Malta with her blonde hair blowing over her face and a wide, cheeky smile. In contrast, she looks protective in her cream woollen jumper with the puppy picture. Cynthia likes that John reads and is educated with a Biology Degree. She thinks she can get him to try new things. In reality, though, John is a creature of habit. He is not as outgoing as he suggested.

He walks towards the Chinese buffet where they had agreed to meet on their first date. Cynthia was a bit funny about eating in front of John so soon, but he managed to convince her. A three-legged dog hobbles past. There seems to be something wrong with its eyes. Its mouth is foaming and it keeps knocking into lampposts, litter bins, and a street sign as it approaches. The poor mutt is whimpering. John bends down to pet it.

"Come on, boy. Watch where you're going." He scratches the dog's

ear and recoils. It comes off in his hand. There are white maggots or worms writhing from the fresh wound. The dog doesn't feel pain. It limps over and licks John's hand. "Fuck off! Get off me, you flea-ridden dirt bag." The dog cocks its head as the pupil-less eyes stream. "Fuck off, Lassie. Go away." John runs to the Chinese. He is really aware of his appearance as he smooths his field jacket down like it's covered in hairs.

The restaurant on George Street is busy. It's more run-down than John recalls. It looks like the electricians have popped for a tea-break mid-job. Some of the loose cables are sparking. And the decor couldn't be more tasteless. The wallpaper, from the 1960s, is peeling and there's a lot of dust covering the tables and lamp shades. It is quite dark inside. John thinks it's an unusual ambience. He looks anxiously for Cynthia. He spots her by the window.

John pecks her on the cheek and offers his hand. Cynthia leans in. She has a lot of make up on. Her floral dress has been ripped. "Did you bike here?" Cynthia looks puzzled. "I just thought your dress was caught in the chain." She laughs. "You are funny," she says before muttering something under her breath. John thinks she looks older than he had imagined. He wonders where all the staff are.

Cynthia looks over his shoulder as she swings her legs in boredom. They are sat on swivel bar stools and she has decided she's uncomfortable. There is a man who has lost a lot of weight but hasn't shopped for clothes. She thinks his frame is peculiar, while she watches him tear into the leg of what is probably lamb. "Where are all the staff?" she asks. John smiles; he was just thinking the same thing. "They're probably on dinner break or something." She looks off.

John feels hungry now. He notices how delicate Cynthia's bracelet and necklace are. Then he sees the bandages below her neckline. He is thinking about windsurfing in Malta. Cynthia looks at her watch, but it's missing. "Where are all the staff?" She asks this like it's a new observation.

"Are you feeling OK, Cynthia?" She nods. Her neck is a little jerky as if she's trying to balance her head. John thinks that Cynthia doesn't think very much. He asks her if she's been here before. "Oh yes!" she beams. "Lots of men like to meet me here." John guffaws. He cuts his laugh short. She is being deadly serious. "I see," he reflects, after a quiet age. "Well, it's good that you're popular!" He wants to go.

"Where are ..." John cuts her short with a finger on his pouting lips. He can pass as a librarian. "I think it's self-service," he adds. Cynthia looks surprised. She is bewildered. John leans in. He has an odd thought. He thinks that Cynthia has the shortest memory, like a goldfish. He gets up. "Let's get something to eat, shall we?" Cynthia

gently nods. He gestures for her to go first. He sweeps his arm again. She laughs. John is impatient. She obviously doesn't do chivalry. She follows him to the buffet.

There is lots of colourful fare on offer. The meats are covered in thick, red sauce that must be sweet and sour. It is irregular and looks home-cooked rather than overly processed, square and earlier frozen.

She is looking a bit shifty. Maybe it's the ambience. John starts to pile his plate up like there's a famine. He expects Cynthia to say, "You can always go back for more" or "You've got a healthy appetite, John." But she is silent. She hasn't got a plate. John pops his down as he fetches her one. Then he sees the axe embedded in the back of her skull. He reaches for it like a pesky fly. He isn't surprised by the new adornment. He grabs the wooden handle. She takes a fancy to his arm. She feasts as he pulls his severed limb away.





# Random Art Drawing

by Novyl the  
Mysterious

# Angels Don't Wear Denim

by Lenore Sagaskie

My parents packed our family into the station wagon and moved us out of the city shortly after I became a mature graduate of the first grade. I remember them saying it was for the country air and better schools, but as I watched the cityscape disappear to be replaced by empty fields and a solitary row of telephone poles, it felt like exile to the middle of nowhere. It was so rural our road didn't even have a name; it was given the dubious distinction of being called a "rural route." Our nearest neighbors were at least a kilometer away and were even more remote than we were. Our new home was situated on the corner at the intersection of Rural Route Five and Highway Six, a fairly well-traveled two-lane highway that was a major artery for commuters into the big city from the northern towns.

Our new home wasn't a traditional one. It had been a ten-unit motel and restaurant with a residence attached. My Armenian father had successfully branched away from his father's family business and started a flooring business of his own. He was motivated to expand his business, and the high-traffic location of our new home was perfect. He spruced up the motel units and rented them out to university students while he completed renovations. The restaurant was gutted and transformed into a showroom for carpet samples and rugs from around the world. Behind the showroom he built a two-storey addition that created a spacious warehouse in the back. The addition had many benefits. Not only was it used for storing rolls of carpet and as a place to clean rugs, it doubled our living space. The addition my father built added an entire wing to the upstairs. The wing connected to the upstairs of the old. Dad designed a new kitchen, a dining room, living room, and family room. Though the original living room and kitchen were located downstairs, we never used them and lived entirely upstairs. All our bedrooms and the

bathroom were located upstairs in the old house.

My bedroom was situated next to the extension and it didn't have a window. As a child I never questioned why I didn't have a window in my room, but as an adult I speculate that the original window was lost when the addition was built. Anyway, it was dark at night when the lights were off—really dark, the kind of total darkness that as an adult I still struggle with. As a child, it was more than challenging. My father didn't allow things that coddled children, things like night lights. He believed that children toughened up if you made them, and he would force me to sleep in that room in total darkness. Sometimes my mother would let me leave the door open a crack to allow a little light to filter in, but I was on my own if my father happened to walk past. If he saw my door open to allow even a splinter of light into the room, he would let his displeasure show in ways I prefer not to discuss.

My father didn't have a lot of patience, and he wasn't very kind, but he worked hard to make our house a home. Both my parents participated in the daily running of the business. Dad was clever and showcased several of his premier brands of flooring throughout the house. He would often convince potential customers to walk through our home to show them how the carpet looked, sometimes going to the extreme of pouring beet juice on the gold and black carpet to demonstrate the stain resistance. Mom made sure we got onto the school bus every morning and was in the showroom when we returned home every day. The store was always busy after school, so we would quietly go upstairs, watch television, and wait until closing time to have dinner together as a family. It worked well for a while.

It didn't take long for my brother and sister and I to get accustomed

to our new school and neighborhood. I was a very social child and made friends easily. My new friend at school lived on a dairy farm and looked like Pippi Longstocking, the freckle-faced girl with braided red hair who had the best adventures I'd ever read. I loved and devoured all the books that featured my beloved literary heroine, and I was eager to begin some adventures with my new friend Holly. I didn't get to spend a lot of time with her outside of school hours because she lived a few miles away and she was always busy with the chores that were part of farm life. I accepted the limitations on our friendship and resigned to spending more time with her at school. I had other companions.

It concerned my parents that even though I had plenty of school friends, I often preferred the company of my imaginary ones. I guess it was even more troubling to them when they realized that my imaginary friends weren't children. Sometimes I had a difficult time getting up in the morning for school because I was up talking with my friends all night. On more than one occasion my parents would walk past my room at night, discover the door open a crack, and hear me chatting away when I was supposed to be asleep. A few times my door would explode open, and I would cower in fear to see my father looming in the doorway, backlit by the bright light in the hallway as it pierced the darkness. My father engaged this tactic expecting to catch one of my siblings he believed had snuck down the hall into my room. I think it only made him angrier to discover that I was alone, conversing with an unseen friend. He would rage at me about my open door then emphasize his anger by slamming it shut, leaving me in the depths of darkness. As I got older it wasn't so much the darkness that frightened me, it was the knowledge that I wasn't alone in it. Sometimes there were monsters waiting to keep me company, too.

I still remember the first time I saw faces in the dark. I thought I was having a nightmare when a flash of a glowing face appeared in front of mine. I remember shrieking, though more in surprise than in fear. As soon as I cried out, my father burst into my room; his raised voice made it clear that his patience had already been exceeded. I don't remember exactly what I said to him, but my outburst cost me a hard swat on the behind before he stormed out, slamming the door behind

him, imprisoning me in that inky void. Weeping and humiliated—and not wanting to catch a glimpse of anything else in the darkness—I pulled the covers over my face and cried myself to sleep while I felt the comforting sensation of fingers stroking my hair.

I saw different faces in the dark during the time I lived in that house, and I had more than a few “imaginary friends.” I enjoyed talking to them because it was a window into adulthood I could sneak a peek into. I took full advantage of it. I wanted to know things like what adults did for fun, what it was like to have a job, live on your own, and fall in love. I shared details of my life too, details that they waited for and hung on to, just as I hung on to the details and minutiae of their lives. I remember how excited I was when I came home with the jawbone of a cow, a gift from one of my classmates. My parents were trying to be supportive, but I remember their poorly-concealed disgust. I happily told my friends that evening about how my grade school crush, David Moyer, fished it out of a swamp and presented it to me at school in front of everyone. I loved rocks and bones. When he gave me that jawbone, it felt like a public declaration of love. My friends agreed that it was indeed a gesture of love and that he cared for me at least as much as I did for him. It felt good to have interested, supportive friends.

My best friend's name was John. When I first met him, I thought he was an angel because he had stars on his hands. I had never seen tattoos on anyone before—at least, not that I remembered. Who would have stars on their hands but angels? I guess I should've known from the handful of times I attended church that angels don't wear denim. John wore denim like it was his uniform. His jeans and jacket were time-faded but smooth and free of creases. He had blue eyes and hair the color of beach sand; the length just grazed the collar of his jacket. His kind face held a soft smile that invited you to smile in return. I liked that about him. So few adults I knew smiled when they spoke with children, but he always had one for me, even when I wasn't feeling much like giving one to him in return. John told me of his adventures and oh, how I loved a good story! He had a motorcycle that gave him the freedom to set out on his adventures. He told me stories of driving across the prairies, watching the sunset in every province and state he ventured into. I would close my eyes



just to listen to his voice and imagine what it was like to see the sunset paint the canvas of the sky into a kaleidoscope of jewel tone colors, or wait out a thunderstorm under an overpass or bridge anticipating the pastel hues of a rainbow breaking through the storm cloud-darkened skies. He told me he traveled with a sleeping bag and a tent so when he grew tired he could pull off the road into the trees and sleep under the stars. He'd been to places I read about and always wanted to go—places like Saskatoon, and Calgary, and even up into the Yukon—just to experience the northern lights in the wilderness at their best and brightest. He told me that it was okay to go on adventures but to be careful of motorcycles. “They were the death of me,” he would say, then quickly change the subject before I could ask what he meant. John told me as many stories as I read; I was a voracious reader and read a mountain of books above my grade level by the time I was in the fourth grade. Just as I devoured my favorite books, I hung on his every word.

John was more than my friend—he was my constant companion. I learned so much more from him than I did either of my parents. Though we had some of our best discussions at night when I was tucked into bed, he would roam about the house to whatever room I happened to occupy. I always knew he was there; even when I couldn't see him, I would sense his presence in the room and instinctively turn toward him. He had a love of music, especially the records that my father had. My brother and sister and I would sneak into the living room when my parents were busy and play my father's records. We would listen to Bill Haley and His Comets and dance like fools to “Rock Around the Clock.” John would always be there just in the corner, smiling and tapping his feet. It made me happy when he told me our dancing was “cool” and “groovy.” I know he loved Elvis, and sometimes at night after I told him stories like I was Scheherazade in *The Tales of the Arabian Nights*, he would sing softly as I drifted off to sleep. He was there giving me his best when things started to take a turn for the worst.

My parent's marriage was falling apart, and it was taking a toll on our family. Mom became silent and smoked cigarettes one after the other. Dad was out later and later on installation jobs and was no longer present at our dinner table. He often returned home after our

bedtime, so he wasn't concerned about my door being open anymore. I still left it open a crack, but only to eavesdrop as my parents argued in their bedroom down the hall. I could hear them talking loudly even though they would try to keep it hushed, but occasionally it would be punctuated with a scuffle or a slap, or worse. I think the anger and the violence drew the others out of hiding. They found me.

John's presence had shielded me from the others since my first encounter with the glowing face in my room. As my parents fought more, the bad ones were appearing more frequently. It was as if they sensed the turmoil and were drawn to it. Perhaps there's a law of attraction, but back then I just sensed that things were changing, and it felt like the darkness of my room was creeping into my home and my life. Even though I was only nine years old, I sensed that the worst was coming.

The Sad Lady started to come around more at night when John was telling me stories. I never did learn her name—I don't even remember her telling me. I named her the “Sad Lady” because she just felt overwhelmingly sad to me. She always appeared in a yellow summer dress speckled with a pattern of tiny white flowers. It hung on her shoulders with thin spaghetti straps. She would stand off to the side of my bed, one hand clutching her opposite wrist, her head at just the right angle to hang a lock of hair across one side of her face. She would look up at me through that strand of hair with dark eyes and heavy lids that looked as if she had been crying. While John always had a smile for me, I don't think I ever saw one cross her face. She rarely spoke, and when she did, she spoke quietly and carefully as if the words leaving her mouth caused her pain. She would listen to John's stories and sometimes would close her eyes and sigh. I always wondered if she was envisioning her own adventures. When my parents started to argue, she would break from her reverie and move about the room like a nervous bird. If my father began to rant or storm down the hallway she would move into the far corner of the room and return to the darkness. I think she was afraid of violent men. She didn't have to worry about him for long.

My father left our house Christmas Eve in a whirlwind of rage, overturning furniture and breaking anything that was in his path,

including the Christmas tree. We children were packed into the car and taken to our grandparents' home while my mother tried to sort things out. Before we left, Mom was overwhelmed with emotion and couldn't muster the energy to do anything but sprawl on the divan in the living room smoking cigarettes in her robe. I caught a glimpse of one of the bad ones lurking in the corner by her ashtray, breathing in the spirals of smoke as they danced toward the ceiling. After my father left, I saw them more frequently, those unwanted faces in the dark.

Sometimes I was intimidated by those grimacing faces. I could feel their anger before they made an appearance. When they did, The Sad Lady would disappear as if she could sense their arrival. They were even more terrifying when they were shouting. I could never understand why no one else could hear their rage. Why was it my burden to bear? I was floundering under the weight of it. The worst of those nights I could feel their breath on my skin, and I would retreat under the sheets, using them as a safety barrier to keep the bad ones at bay. John's appearance would chase them away, but I soon learned that even he was not always there for me. I think he was afraid of them too. I felt lost without my friend, and my mother sank into a cloud of apathy that suffocated all of us.

My grandparents moved in with us to help my mother cope with getting the house and the contents ready to sell. Things got a bit better for the family and the household quieted. The bad ones stopped harassing me but remained as silent witnesses. I could sense their continued presence. Not long after, the Sad Lady just disappeared one day, and I never saw her again. I hoped she found some reason to smile. After my grandparents settled in, things got calmer, and a new level of normalcy became commonplace. I still had difficulties settling into our new routine. I continued to struggle and became less outgoing and more introverted, retreating to my room as soon as I got home from school and only coming out to eat. I only wanted the company of my books and my friend and wrapped myself in the comfort his presence gave me. One night when I was whispering secrets in the dark, my Nan heard me talking to John. "I want to meet him," she declared from the doorway. "Do you think he would mind?" I looked toward the foot of the bed where he sat,

smiling his perfect smile. He shrugged then nodded. I told her I would ask him. He didn't wait long to make her acquaintance.

One day I spied my mom and grandmother sitting at the kitchen table, bent over their morning cup of orange pekoe tea. They were speaking with hushed voices, though Nan had a distinct voice that was audible from across the room even when she was whispering. Their heads were so close together I knew it was something they didn't want any of us kids to hear. I crept into the room and hid just inside the entry to the living room so I could listen.

"I heard her talking to him a few nights ago, Pat," my Nan said.

"She does that every night, Mum," my Mom replied. "He's been her imaginary friend ever since we moved here." She sipped her tea and gave my Nan an irritated glare.

"I asked her if I could meet him, and she told me that she would ask him," Nan said as she looked around the room. She bent her head closer and talked even quieter.

"Oh?" Mom's head snapped upward. Nan smiled, knowing she had her full attention.

"Last night I went to bed and woke up with a start around midnight. I felt like I was being watched. I couldn't move. It was as if my body was paralyzed. I tried to wake your father, but I couldn't speak either." Nan took a sip of her tea. "Then I saw someone sitting on the edge of the bed."

"What? You never did!"

Nan reached across the table and gave her hand a hard squeeze. "I'm telling you Pat, I did. He was a young bloke around our Peter's age, maybe younger, but definitely not a child."

My mom shook her head as she tugged her hand out of Nan's grasp. "You had to have dreamed it, Mum. He's her imaginary friend. He's not real."



Nan stared at mom until she couldn't bear the intensity and had to break away from it. "He spoke to me. Spoke to me! He told me things about her, things that she told him. Things even I didn't know—and you know how much I adore that child. He told me how much he cared for her, though I don't remember everything he said." Nan set down her cup. "I was a little rattled by it, Pat, but I thought you should know that our girl doesn't just have imaginary friends. She sees ghosts."

Mom sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "What should I do about this?"

Nan drained her cup and set it on the table. "It's not hurting anything, and she's happy. For now, just let them be."

I snuck back to my room unseen by either of them. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear any more or even if they had anything left to say. Nan never mentioned their meeting to me and neither did John. I was too intimidated to ask. I'm sure John knew that I overheard my Nan in the kitchen that day. He always knew where I was. I still saw him, but it felt like his visits were becoming less frequent. By the time we moved, his nightly visits were reduced to a few nights a week. I felt his absence more than I cared to admit.

When we moved, I said goodbye. I don't remember exactly what I said. They were words that I thought you had to say when you politely said goodbye to someone forever. But every detail of it is still etched in my mind: how bare and lonely the room looked as I scrutinized the pockmarks left in the carpet from the bed casters, how the silhouette of the dresser was brighter and cleaner than the rest of the walls. I remember the peach wallpaper curling up at the seam on the wall closest to where my bed had been for so many years. I remember how John stood there in his usual spot, the same as he ever was, except that his perfect smile wavered long enough for me to notice. He appeared smaller to me now than he did all those years ago. At the ripe age of twelve, I wasn't much shorter than he was. I would have given the world any sacrifice it demanded just to hug him, but I knew I never could. It was the deepest heartache I ever felt in my whole life, even deeper than my parent's divorce or leaving

behind David Moyer. I turned my back; my shoulders shook with the effort it took not to burst into tears as I left him standing in my empty room. In my mind's eye, I will always see him standing there in that place where I grew to love him.

We started a new life back in the city once more. My mom remarried, and we moved into a townhouse in the city. I attended a new school. Time healed my heart as time always does. I stopped seeing ghosts. I don't know if that's a gift that children possess that dissipates when puberty hits, but I never saw any before or since we left that place. Perhaps it's possible that none could ever have taken his place.

My father remained, for the most part, absently present. He would breeze into my life whenever it was convenient and when it made him look good. Even during good times, he would rage about the unfairness of the divorce and child support and make excuses about how he couldn't afford to support us. He had a new family now, he reminded us, and they were his priority. For the first few visits, we always met in coffee shops or in his new store, which was located in a faceless strip mall devoid of the character of our old place. I felt like an outsider instead of family, and soon it felt like my visits were more of a burden to him, so I started to see him less and less.

I met someone who made my heart soar, and he became my world. We married in a simple ceremony that my father couldn't attend—his new family had plans that day. In many ways it felt like a blessing; there was only room for one man to rage that day, and I learned that my new husband shared some traits with my father. In no time I felt like I was caught in a déjà vu repeating my parents' lives just as they were when I was a kid. Instead of watching it through the eyes of a scared child, I was living it, repeating my mother's role. It made me remember those times in the past, and I found myself remembering my old friend who gave me so much comfort during those times. I found it more than ironic that I saw two examples of men during my childhood and I found myself exactly where I didn't want to be. I needed to find comfort once more. I started to doubt myself. Did John really exist, or was he just something my child's mind made up to get me through the worst of times? And if he existed, was he really how I remembered, or did the passing of time make him better than he was?

Maybe I built things up in my mind, but no man could ever live up to the standard of my childhood friend. I'm still not sure if it is a reflection of my expectations, but I have never managed to make the right choices when it comes to companions. None of them could measure up to that perfect man I met as a child. On the eve of my impending divorce, I had a sudden urge to go visit the ghost that had set the bar too high for any mortal man. I drove instinctively, every road and turn navigated as if I'd driven there just the other day, though it had been decades since I'd even thought of that place. The motel units were still there, but the house and carpet store were long gone. It looked like it had once been renovated back into a restaurant and then renovated once more so that the restaurant and the entire building had been converted into apartments. I sat in the parking lot in my car and stared in shock. It was too much. I started to cry. It wasn't what I was searching for after all that time. I'd left that place

as a child with a broken heart, and with new heartache I returned. Through my pain it all came flooding back, every single memory, every shared laugh, the love I felt for him, and the knowledge that it was the purest love I ever received from someone who just wanted to be my friend.

"I miss you, John," I whispered as I closed my eyes and wiped tears from my cheeks. I sat there and stared at the ghost of my childhood home, imagining it as it once was, the way I held it in my mind's eye. I needed it to be as it was; I needed those memories intact. I straightened up and clenched the steering wheel just as I felt the once familiar sensation of his fingers trailing through my hair. I glanced toward the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of a denim sleeve and a hand with stars on it brushing across my cheek as I pulled out of the parking lot.

by Jesper Nordqvist

## NOTES

I'm Jesper Nordqvist, aka 'Ragathol', a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. Mondo Mecho was my first longer drama comic, published as a web comic between ca 2006-2009. It was supposed to be a long epic story, but sadly couldn't be finished due to other things coming in between, like getting a contract to make another Science Fantasy comic for publication. That was TANKS, and although it's only published in Sweden, I've been making a lot more comics since then, most of which are available at [gumroad.com/ragathol](http://gumroad.com/ragathol).

Mondo Mecho was a lot of fun to work on, and I learned a lot — which you'll be able to see clearly as it goes on. I hope that I'll be able to pick it up again (or rather, to remake it) some day. I hope you'll enjoy it — although it's a bit silly in the beginning, it picks up a bit as it progresses. Thank you for reading!

Believe it or not, I hate drawing lots of people and giant cityscape pictures ... yet I end up including them every time I make a story...

The square at the first panel could have been even more packed, but I wanted some overview.

Panel 3: You'd need quite a lot of those shuttles to move billions of people! o\_o

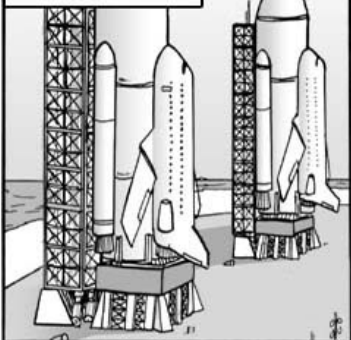
IN THE TWENTY-THIRD CENTURY, THE HUMAN POPULATION ON EARTH EXCEEDED TEN BILLION, MUCH MORE THAN THE PLANET COULD LOGICALLY SUPPORT.



THE DOWNSIZED COLONIZATION OF MARS PROGRAM WAS INITIALIZED ONCE AGAIN, THIS TIME WITH MANY TIMES THE ORIGINAL BUDGET.



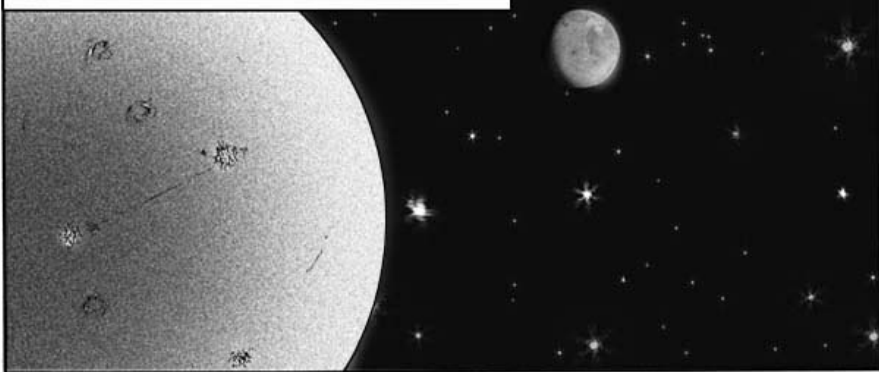
AFTER TERRAFORMING AND ARTIFICIAL ATMOSPHERE SETUP, BILLIONS OF PEOPLE MOVED TO THE RED PLANET, RELIEVING THE STRESS ON EARTH.



THE TERRAN PIONEERS FOUNDED THE FIRST CITIES OF MARS, AND OVER THE YEARS THEY GREW INTO TOWERING MEGAPOLIS.



THESE CITIES ARE IN FACT THE ONLY STRUCTURES BUILT BY HUMAN HANDS THAT CAN BE SEEN FROM THE MOONS. THE MOONS OF MARS, THAT IS...



MONDO MECO PAGE 1 20090624 © JESPER NORDQVIST



PART ONE: WHAT'S FOR WORK TODAY, HUN?



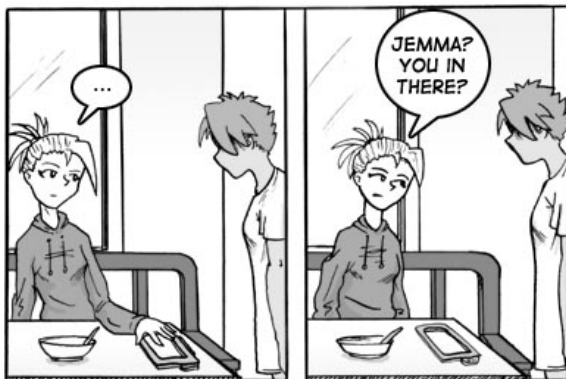
## NOTES

So it starts ...

That newspaper pad is quite similar to today's PalmPilots, but more advanced and with a holographic screen.





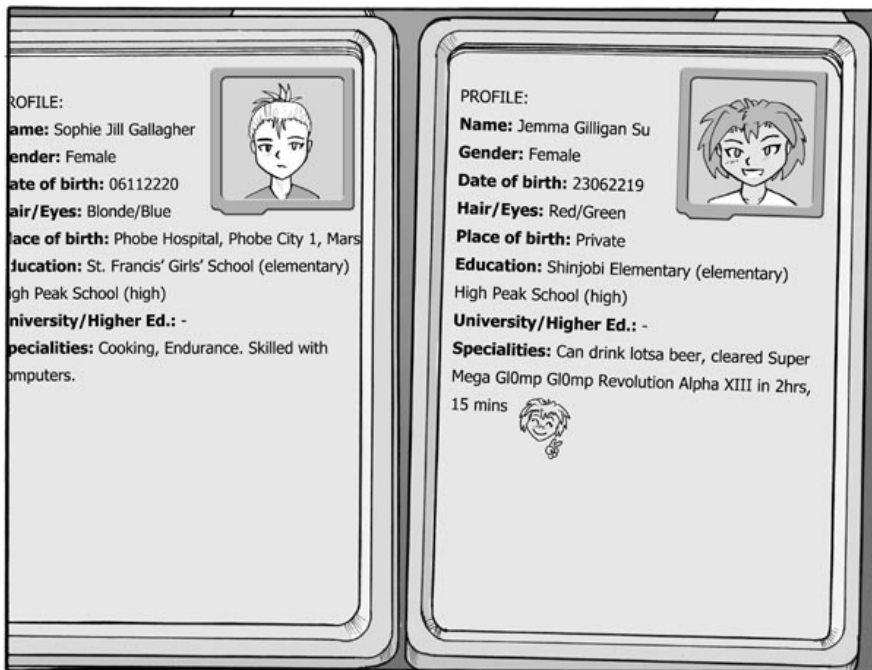


## NOTES

Oya, this page is all crap.. ~\_~

I swear, Gehenna's proportions are different in every fricking panel... And there was no end to the ink smudging and general crap when I drew the page.. God bless digital touchup.





## NOTES

This page was actually finished (ink) before 2 am, a bit disappointing...

Guess I went a bit overboard with the tones ^\_^. but hey, tones are what makes the picture look good.

Those things in the bookshelf in the background are info files, like the ones of J & G on the table. They wrote those reviews themselves, by the way...







## NOTES

J&G goes rogue!

If you wonder what the heck that fence is doing there, just keep on reading... If you do not ponder this mighty question, keep reading anyways...







## NOTES

Ergo; the fences are there to stop the traffic from going overboard... the traffic should be quite heavy, but I don't want the pictures to be too messy either... It's always a matter of balance, though the massive fence textures may have tipped the scales this time... >\_<

Kan du se dig själv, Martin? ^\_^

I don't know if you've noticed, but I have actually stopped inking my pages now (yes, really).

I've once again moved over completely to pencil... every once in a while I think that it should be fun to use ink, I don't really know why, maybe because you're supposed to ink a comic... Well, anyways, it sucks, so I have once again taken to my very best purchases yet; the Pilot Color Eno with light blue leads and the fabulous Stabilo All 8008 pencil ^\_^

Now I sketch the pages with light blue pencil and make the clean drawing directly over the sketch with the black lead. When I scan the page (in grayscale), the light blue do not show up at all, and I automatically have a clean drawing ^\_^ This saves a tremendous amount of time in the inking department, and it looks better too, I can do freer lines.

It doesn't mean the total job on the page is less though.. I sat for at least four hours with the tones on this one >\_>

But it's a bit special too... I hope you like the new results ^\_^

Cheers!

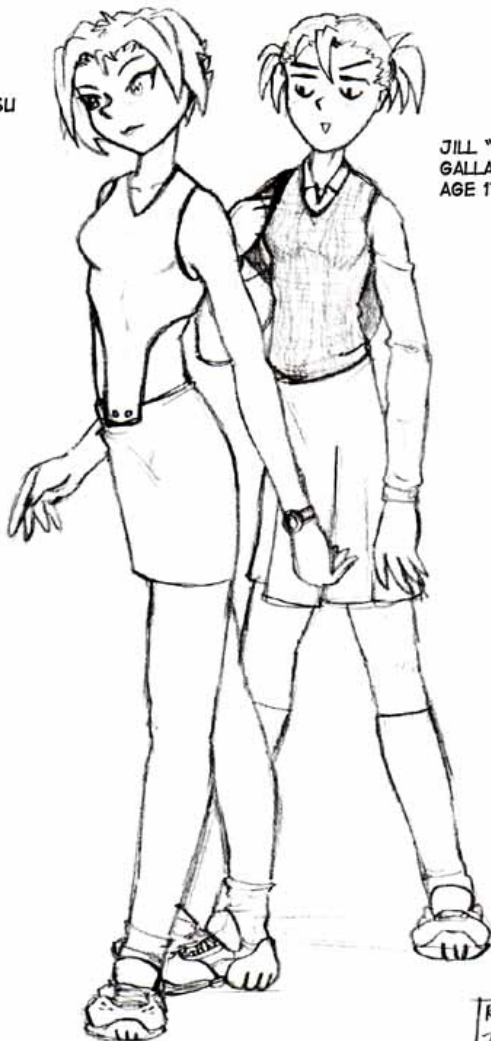
//Rag

ON THEIR WAY HOME FROM  
SCHOOL, THE TWO YOUNG  
FRIENDS ENCOUNTER A  
STRANGE LITTLE MAN...

JEMMA SU  
AGE 18

? YARE YARE...

JILL "GEHENNA"  
GALLAGHER  
AGE 17



RA9  
2K3

## NOTES

### ABOUT COMICS AND CHARACTERS

When my friends and family see my stuff, they often say that they recognize Jemma from somewhere, and it's no wonder, given that she's inspired from so many other characters. At first sight, she might look somewhat like a clone of Kei from Adam Warren's *The Dirty Pair*, and where looks are concerned, she has much of Kei indeed, though it's quite coincidental.. I first made up Jemma and Gehenna before I had even read *The Dirty Pair*, but maybe they have formed after DP... Other influences for Jemma are Kaolla Su (the jumpyness and the surname as a little wink) and Mitsune Konno (slackerism) from *Love Hina*, and not least Clover Conelly from Chynna Clugston-Major's excellent comic *Blue Monday*. Strangely enough, Gehenna has no real influences of that kind... but then I'm fighting to make her more of a lead character instead of the sidekick, too...

A webcomic with really great characters is PockyBot, arted and crafted by my online buddy // c0ry. Featuring no less than futurepop, '80s retro gaming, tofu, squishy giant penguins and wacko kids in a random 3am hit mix, this webcomic is unlike anything else. Be sure to check it out.

Cheers

//Rag



# Contributor's Bios

JAMES CUKR's work can be found at [cukr7.myportfolio.com](http://cukr7.myportfolio.com)



**COLLEEN DONNELLY** is a professor at the University of Colorado at Denver specializing in medieval and modern literature and health humanities.

More of **T. MOTLEY**'s comics are at [tmotley.com](http://tmotley.com).

**JESPER NORDQVIST**, aka 'Ragathol', is a comic artist and illustrator from Sweden, specialized in fantasy and SF comedy and drama. He's been making a lot more comics since creating *Mondo Mecho*, most of which are available at [gumroad.com/ragathol](http://gumroad.com/ragathol).

**NOVYL THE MYSTERIOUS** can be found on Instagram and Twitter under the username [@lyv0n](https://www.instagram.com/lyv0n).



**LENORE SAGASKIE** is a fantasy and horror writer from Canada living in self-imposed exile in Michigan. The first two books in her fantasy series: *The Four Sworn: Spring Equinox*, and *The Four Sworn: Summer Solstice*, are currently available on Amazon. Her horror/comedy film, *Out of the Grave*, is in post-production indefinitely. Lenore is writing the third book in The Four Sworn series, and her next short film, *Rage*, is currently in pre-production indefinitely. You can find Lenore lurking on Twitter and Instagram as [@lenorewrites](https://www.instagram.com/lenorewrites), and on Facebook as herself.



**MARK ANTHONY SMITH** was born in Hull. His writings have appeared in many small press and Horror Anthologies. *Something Said* is his latest book, which is available on Amazon. A Horror collection is on pre-order too.

Facebook: Mark Anthony Smith - Author

Twitter: [MarkAnthonySm16](https://twitter.com/MarkAnthonySm16)



**CHRISTINA SNG** is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *A COLLECTION OF NIGHTMARES* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2017), Elgin Award runner-up *ASTROPOETRY* (Alban Lake Publishing, 2017), and *A COLLECTION OF DREAMSCAPES* (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2020).

Her poetry, fiction, and art have appeared in numerous venues worldwide, and her poems have garnered multiple nominations in the Rhysling Awards, the Dwarf Stars, the Elgin Awards, as well as honorable mentions in the Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, and the Best Horror of the Year.

Visit her at [christinasng.com](http://christinasng.com) and connect on social media [@christinasng](https://www.instagram.com/christinasng).

**GRACE WAGNER** is a queer, nonbinary writer living with a disability in Houston where they teach at the University of Houston. They have attended the New York Summer Writers Institute and work as Assistant Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*. Their work has been featured in *Salmagundi Magazine*, *The Atlanta Review*, *The Offing*, and is upcoming in *Hayden's Ferry Review*.





**Eclipse/Penumbra** (full image) by James Cukr